

Not a Tame Lion: *Seeing It As It Is*

Amos 7:1-8:14

Preached by Minister Jason Tarn at HCC on 3/10/2013

Introduction

- ❖ A young white woman builds an unexpected relationship with two black maids during the early 60s in civil rights-era America. She is an aspiring journalist in the deep South who writes a book that comes from the point of view of black maids, and it ends up exposing the racism and injustice inherent in the whole idea of "separate but equal".
 - ▶ That is the plot of the movie, *The Help*. I saw it recently and what fascinated me was how the immorality of racial segregation was so easily glossed over by practically everyone in that town and just accepted as the normal way of life.
 - The point of the movie is that what this town needed most is for someone to finally speak up and call a spade a spade. They needed someone with the guts to tell it as it is so that everyone could see things as they really are. You call it segregation but really it's institutional racism. You label it "separate but equal" but really it's just an example of a systemic sin.

- ❖ **I believe every town, every community, in every generation, needs someone like that to speak up and tell it as it is.** The problem is that we have grown too accustomed to certain sins in our lives or in society, and we tend to use innocuous labels to describe them. That ends up diminishing the gravity of these behaviors.
 - ▶ It's not adultery anymore, it's now a moral failure. It's not being greedy, it's being consumer-minded. It's not being prideful, it's being extremely self-confident. It's not being rude or mean, it's having a personality disorder.
 - I'm sorry but sin is sin. Dressing it up with another label does no one any good. **That's why I'm so thankful for those who see sin as it is, call sin as it is, and earnestly plead for sinners to turn from it.**

- ❖ This is what Amos did for the nation of Israel. He saw their exploitation of the poor, their oppression of the needy, their fervent worship of idols and he openly named them. He meant to shock them and offend them. They had grown numb. They had found ways to excuse their sin, to downplay its seriousness. And that's why Amos shows up and calls sin "sin" and then calls the people to repentance – to turn away from it.
 - ▶ This is what his book has been about. For the past month we've been walking through it chapter by chapter and hearing a repeated note. The prophet has been singing the same tune, sounding the same gong. He's been telling Israel to stop fooling themselves into thinking that their sin is no big deal. To stop thinking they have some sort of exemption from judgment and to start repenting.

- ❖ It's these same notes that get replayed in this morning's passage in chapters 7-8. As we walk through it, you'll come to see that Amos was the type of person Israel needed, and I hope to demonstrate this morning that he's the type of person our world needs today.

The World Needs Someone to Intercede with Pity

- ❖ **1) The world needs someone to stand in the gap and intercede with pity.** In other words, we need someone (or a community of someones) to see the reality of our great peril as

unrighteous sinners who will one day have to meet a holy God in judgment. We need someone who sees this coming day so clearly that it moves them to pity and to prayer.

- ❖ We need intercessors – people who stand in the gap pleading for mercy on behalf of sinners. We need more people like George Mueller, the 19th century pastor in Bristol, England. The story is told that one day he started to intercede for the salvation of five friends, and he never stopped. After two years, one of them came to accept Christ as his Savior.
 - ▶ After ten years, two more came to the Lord. Twenty-five years later, the fourth was saved. And as for his last friend, he kept praying for a total of 52 years. He actually died with his fifth friend still unsaved. But as the story goes, only a few months after Mueller's death, this man also came to trust in Jesus.¹
 - This is the kind of someone I'm talking about. **This fallen world needs more George Muellers – men and women who persistently intercede on behalf of sinners pleading for God to be merciful and to save.**

- ❖ Amos is just that kind of man, and he exemplifies this in chapter 7:1-6. Here he receives a clear vision of a coming judgment against Israel. It'll come in the form of crop-eating locusts sweeping through the land.
 - ▶ Such a sight moves Amos to great pity and drives him to his knees in intercessory prayer. "*O Lord GOD, please forgive! How can Jacob (another name for Israel) stand? He is so small!*" (v2)
 - Notice how Amos is boldly asking God to forgive. He points out that many are too small and helpless to survive such a plague. He pleads for mercy.

- ❖ Now there is no indication of any repentance on the part of the Israelites. The people are just as blind to their sin as before. **But Amos is pleading for God to give them more time to come to repentance.** "*Please, Lord GOD, Jacob cannot withstand your judgment. Please withhold it and give them more time to repent.*"
 - ▶ And how does God respond? He stops the plague even before it starts and without any prerequisite repentance on their part. He says, "*It shall not be.*" The LORD relents. This is an act of pure grace, treating people better than their sins deserve.

- ❖ Now the same thing happens again in vv4-6. The Lord GOD shows Amos a clear vision of coming disaster. This time "*judgment by fire*". We don't have much details but some sort of catastrophic event will cause massive destruction.
 - ▶ Once again Amos intercedes for the people and the LORD relents. "*This also shall not be.*" And once again God demonstrates that he is patient, and that he is willing to show mercy to an undeserving people.

¹ Byran Chapell, *Praying Backwards*, 123.

- ❖ **It was mercy to even give Amos these visions in the first place.** God could have carried his plans (his righteous judgment against Israel) without including or informing any prophets. He didn't have to reveal any visions to Amos. He has no need to consult with anyone.
 - ▶ But it pleased him to reveal his plans, to tell Amos what will happen to those who refuse to turn from sin. *For what purpose?* To move Amos' heart to pity. To stir his heart to prayer. **When God graciously reveals what he's going to do to sinners, his intent is to move us to pity and to prayer, to the ministry of intercession.**

- ❖ When God revealed to Abraham his plans for the sinners of Sodom and Gomorrah, it moved Abraham to pity and stirred him up to intercede (Gen. 18:22-33). When God revealed to Moses his plans to wipe out the Israelites and start over with him, it moved Moses to plead for mercy on behalf of the people (Ex. 32:11-14).
 - ▶ When God revealed to Paul the gospel and its warning that all have sinned – Jew and Gentile – and fallen short of his glory, it moved Paul to intercession, even wishing to be accursed if it meant his fellow Jews would be saved (Rom. 9:1-5).
 - In each case, God reveals his plans to someone. And then it moves that someone to pity and compassion for fellow sinners. And then it stirs him/her to intercede, to plead to God for mercy, for forgiveness, for salvation.

- ❖ The same happens for Amos in vv1-6. Now I realize that even while God relents twice as Amos intercedes twice, in the end Israel never repents. God knows that soon enough he will pass over their sins no more. In the end, they'll still face his judgment.
 - ▶ **But the point in vv1-6 is that God truly does listen to prayer.** Amos pleads for God to relent and he does because he truly is patient. He does not wish that any should perish but that all should reach repentance (2 Pet. 3:9).

- ❖ In the end, it's not our responsibility to know his final plans for each and every sinner. **All we need to know is that sin is serious, judgment is real, and repentance is necessary for salvation.** We don't even need a vision to know this to be true. We have the Scriptures.
 - ▶ 2 Thessalonians 1:7-9 says on that final day when Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, he will inflict "*vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might.*"
 - That is a sobering image. It's meant to move you to pity for those who do not know God, who do not believe and obey the gospel. But then verses like ours are meant to move you from pity to prayer. To remember that sin is serious, judgment is real, repentance is necessary, YET God is patient and merciful.

- ❖ Ask yourself: ***When was the last time I followed the scriptural example and interceded for an underserving sinner?*** When was the last time I pleaded on behalf of someone – for God to withhold judgment, to give that person more time to reach repentance? Or when did I last stand in the gap and plead for mercy on behalf of an entire nation or people group?

- ❖ *Brothers and sisters, have you forgotten this amazing gift of intercessory prayer that you received from your Great High Priest?* Through his shed blood, Jesus has made a way through the veil into the holy place before the mercy seat of God.
 - ▶ **Through Christ and in Christ, we have the privilege and the power to intercede on behalf of undeserving sinners** – to stand in the gap and plead for mercy. And when we pray in Jesus' Mighty Name, God listens. It pleases him to consider our requests and to relent, giving the sinners we love more time to reach repentance.
- ❖ If such power has been given to me, why would I limit my prayer life to meeting personal needs? When I do pray for others, why would I only focus on their temporal needs or the more physical and immediate ones?
 - ▶ **Christian, make a commitment this day to never let a day go by where you waste the gift of intercessory prayer.** Be that intercessor the world so desperately needs.

The World Needs Someone to Speak with Conviction

- ❖ But in the end, the world needs more than just someone who is willing to pray in private. 2) **The world needs someone to go public, to even be willing to stand up to opposition and speak with conviction.**
 - ▶ What the world needs is for someone to call out their sin and preach an unpopular message of repentance. But of course they don't know they need that. In fact they'll likely oppose you if you try.
- ❖ Try speaking up and telling the world that if they don't turn from sin and trust in Jesus that "*the punishment of eternal destruction*" is waiting for them. Try telling people that applies even to the most devout Muslim, Hindu, or Buddhist.
 - ▶ Imagine making a public stance for moral absolutes. Imagine speaking out of conviction and affirming that any form of sexual activity outside the confines of marriage as defined by Scripture is a sin. Or imagine telling people their indifference towards the poor and needy is not just indifference but sin.
 - The world doesn't want to hear that. You can be sure they'll try to silence God's prophets and preachers. In fact, that has been the consistent pattern throughout history.
- ❖ According to Jewish tradition, the prophet Isaiah was sawn in two by King Manasseh. Jeremiah was stoned to death in Egypt. Ezekiel was martyred in Babylon. Daniel we all know was thrown into the lion's den. Micah suffered martyrdom under King Jehoram. And Amos, according to tradition, was tortured by Amaziah the priest and martyred by his son.²
- ❖ We read of Amos' confrontation with Amaziah in vv10-17. It started with his vision in v7. There Amos receives a third vision, this time of the Lord holding a plumb line against a wall.

² *The Lives of the Prophets*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lives_of_the_Prophets

- ▶ If you're not familiar, a plumb line is a string with a lead weight fastened to one end. When placed against a wall, the builder is able to determine if it is vertically straight (plumb). If not, then you can be sure the wall will eventually collapse.
- ❖ **So the meaning of this vision is that God is holding up a moral standard against the nation of Israel. It's the plumb line of his Law, and they're not measuring up.** The point is God's judgment is never arbitrary. He never acts on a whim. He never punishes in the heat of rage. His warning of judgment and destruction is both warranted and long-coming.
 - ▶ Israel has been measured again and again, and the conclusion is always the same. The nation is both morally and spiritually crooked and will soon collapse.
- ❖ In v8 the Lord says he will not pass by them again. That is, he will no longer spare them of punishment. Judgment will not longer be delayed. And in v9 we're told that God will destroy the religious institution and the royal family of Israel.
- ❖ You can expect a devastating prediction like that to raise a few heads and get some attention but not necessarily in a positive way. In v10 we meet Amaziah the priest of Bethel. He's likely the high priest since he has the ear of the king. Now in his correspondence with the king, he slanders Amos and paints him as an insurrectionist, a troublemaker. He then warns Amos to go back to Judah and prophesy there because he's no longer welcomed in Bethel.
 - ▶ Notice in v12 that he calls Amos a "seer", which is a term used for royal court prophets or a kind of prophet for hire ("eat bread there", cf. Balaam). But Amos replies in v14 that he is "*no prophet nor a prophet's son*" meaning he is not a professional just doing it for the money. His vocation is a herdsman and one who tends fig-bearing sycamore trees.
 - That means his motivation to prophesy – especially such a gloomy and tough message – is not the money but the call of God. "*The LORD said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel.'*" (7:15) Amos was under divine compulsion. And when the Lord compels, you cannot but comply.
- ❖ If Amos was just in it for the money, then at the first sign of trouble or opposition, he would've ran. **But if you're driven by obedience to God's Word and his call, then you cannot but comply, even when opponents are trying to silence or slander you.**
- ❖ We learned in the past couple of months that a pastor who gets the attention of even the White House for all his efforts in the fight against human trafficking can still be targeted by opponents in a campaign to silence him, to prevent him from delivering a prayer at the recent inauguration ceremony. *And what was his sin? Why were they trying to run him out?*
 - ▶ Because a journalist dug up a sermon he preached almost 20 years ago that affirmed the existence of moral absolutes and, in particular, the sinfulness of a homosexual lifestyle. That's all it took. Pastor Louie Giglio was blackballed, and his voice was no longer welcomed in the public arena.

- ❖ Of course, there is something to be said about the tone of your speech and the avoidance of reckless language. But if you know anything about Louie Giglio and his ministry, you know the man is not known for stridency or mean-spirited, hateful language. If anything you could say that he has been purposefully non-confrontational on these culturally-sensitive issues.
 - ▶ So what we're quickly learning is that if you ever make a public stand on any issue that runs counter to the moral revolution taking place in our morally relativistic society, you'll find yourself standing before opponents who want you silent.

- ❖ Your tone of speech doesn't matter, neither does a careful choice of words. It makes no difference that you're speaking from a heart full of pity and compassion for those who are blind to their sin and peril. It doesn't matter that you're driven by love or the call of God.
 - ▶ **The bottom line is if you call evil what they call good, if you call wrong what they call right, then you'll be marginalized.** You'll be pushed out to the fringes. You'll be slandered, called intolerant or bigoted or hateful. It's sad how things have become.

- ❖ **But what the world doesn't realize is that what it needs the most is for someone with convictional courage to obey the call of God, to stand up to opposition, and to speak the truth in love.** *Will it be you?*
 - ▶ Now considering the way things have gone in the past for God's prophets and preachers, if you take up this mantle you should know that you probably won't be hanging with celebrities. You're more likely to hang on a cross. You won't feel the glow of the spotlight. You'll more likely feel the burn of the stake. You won't receive the praise of man. You'll more likely get their insults and accusations.
 - But for the sake of their souls, for salvation and rescue from judgment, they desperately need someone who sees it as it is and courageously speaks up.

The World Needs Someone to Warn with Urgency

- ❖ Specifically, to speak up and warn of God's coming judgment. **3) The world needs someone to stand against the grain and warn with urgency.** The last thing the world needs is another voice downplaying sin, downplaying judgment, downplaying the need for repentance. Saying "Peace, peace" when there is no peace (Jer. 8:11).
 - ▶ The world needs someone who can see things as they really are from a biblical perspective, someone who is easily moved to pity and prayer, someone who is willing to speak up and call sin "sin", and someone with the urgency to warn people that judgment is real and judgment is coming if you don't repent.

- ❖ This is what Amos does in chapter 8. It is one big warning of God's coming judgment against Israel. The vision of a basket of summer fruit that Amos receives in v1 is an ominous sign. There is an intentional wordplay here. In Hebrew, the word for "*summer fruit*" sounds similar to the word "*end*". The vision of the fruit suggest that Israel's end is certain.

- ▶ In v2 the LORD says, “*The end has come upon my people Israel; I will never again pass by them.*” Notice that the statement is not qualified with an ‘if’ or ‘unless’. There is no escape clause. So in v3, we’re told that very soon the joyous singing in the temple will turn into inconsolable wailing.
 - The people will be wailing, but the scariest thing will be silence coming from heaven. There will be no word from God.

- ❖ Now vv4-6 answer the question of why this judgment is coming. If you’ve been with us through the first six chapters, then this is nothing new. Israel, out of all nations, was chosen and blessed by the Lord and given the vocation of being a blessing. But instead it became an oppressor – trampling on the poor and needy.
 - ▶ And they fooled themselves into thinking they were exempt from judgment, putting false confidence in their religiosity. We read in v5 that they observed all the Jewish customs. But their religious devotion was betrayed by their desires for personal gain. They could hardly wait for these non-working, non-profit-making religious days to be over so they could go back to exploiting the poor.
 - In v7, the Lord promises that he will not forget a single deed of injustice perpetrated and seals it with an oath sworn by the pride of Jacob, most likely a title for God himself.

- ❖ And then in vv8-10, the Lord forewarns what he intends to do to bring justice and judgment upon the land and the heads of sinners. Just notice how many times the Lord says “*I will do this. I will do that.*” It’s meant to emphasize his active part in bringing judgment on Israel.
 - ▶ And then in v11, the people in their great mourning will turn to God for answers, but they’ll be confronted with an deafening silence. They turn to the Lord for news, for some instruction, for a word of hope – but nothing.

- ❖ The Lord says he is sending a famine on the land, “*not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD*” (v11). The people will make a desperate and extensive search for the word of the Lord, but they’ll come up empty (v12). Even the strongest members of society will grow faint and weary (v13). And very quickly they will turn to other gods, false gods, in hope of finding relief and help (v14).
 - ▶ But the final words of v14 seal their fate. “*They shall fall, and never rise again.*” The coming destruction will bring an end to the nation of Israel. And the historical fact that the northern kingdom of Israel fell in 722 B.C. to the Assyrian empire proves that Amos was right and that God truly did abandon the nation.

- ❖ The point we need to get out of these verses is this: **When the Lord does speak to you a word of mercy, a word of gospel, a word of comfort and assurance, do not take it for granted.** There is no guarantee that it will always be there. The people of Amos’ day took it for granted, and when they looked for such a word from the Lord it was nowhere to be found.

- ❖ **Friends, it is a gracious gift to be able to hear God's Word. That should not to be taken lightly.** So listen while you still can.
 - ▶ To be told by God's Word that you're a sinner and that the wages of your sin is death (Rom. 6:23) is not judgmental or hateful. To be told by God's Word that it is appointed for man to die once and after that face judgment (Heb. 9:27) is not a manipulative fear tactic. It's the truth spoken in love.
 - It is out of pure mercy that God would even give you fair warning. He has every right to exact punishment on you without any forewarning. But that's not how he operates. That's not who he is. God is merciful.

- ❖ **So listen while you still can. Listen to the good news about how Jesus died on the cross for your sins and rose again to give you new life in him.** Listen to the biblical promise that if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved! (Rom. 10:9)

- ❖ The world needs someone who can see it as it is from a biblical perspective in order to tell it as it is. To ring a bell warning of God's judgment and to spread a message speaking of God's mercy to undeserving sinners through Christ Jesus our Lord.