

Not a Tame Lion: *In Anger Remembering Mercy*

Amos 9:1-15

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

Introduction

- ❖ Can your God mess you up? Does the “God of your understanding” have the power and prerogative to oppose you, to confront you, to destroy you? Is the God you worship even capable of such things? Or is that simply beyond the pale? That’s the question we’ve been confronted with time and time again as we’ve been going through the prophesy of Amos.
 - ▶ And sadly it’s religious people – of all people – who have the hardest time believing in such a God. Those who read their Bibles all the time – are often the ones with a picture of God that stands in sharp contrast to the God of Amos, to the God he describes in his book.

- ❖ **Amos’ God is not a tame lion.** Hence the name of our sermon series. Chapter 1:2 starts off with the LORD roaring at the nations (cf. 3:8). God is depicted as a ferocious lion, and this prophecy is described as his roar. And this is no lazy roar of a yawning lion. No, it’s the pouncing roar of a ferocious lion committed to the attack.
 - ▶ But man-centered, empty religion has tried its best to tame God. To domesticate him. To declaw him and make him out to be harmless. So now there is no way he’ll hurt you. There is no way he’ll bite you.

- ❖ According to Tim Keller, religious people have created for themselves a Stepford God.¹ If you’ve ever seen the movie, *The Stepford Wives*, you’ll know what he’s talking about. The film is set in a small town called Stepford where the husbands have managed to turn their wives into robots thereby making them fully compliant.
 - ▶ A Stepford wife is a spouse that never challenges you, never contradicts you, and never opposes your will. Now that might sound kind of nice. That is until you realize a robot cannot offer you love or a real relationship.

- ❖ **Keller’s point is that if you construct an image of a tame, docile god who never offends you and is here to serve your needs, then you end up with a Stepford God.**
 - ▶ It’s a god of your own making and not a god with whom you can have a real relationship. Keller says, “*Only if your God can say things that outrage you and make you struggle (as in a real friendship or marriage!) will you know that you have gotten hold of a real God and not a figment of your imagination.*”

- ❖ If you’ve been with us through this series in Amos, I hope you’re coming away with a fuller image of God – a more balanced picture that includes a God of wrath and judgment in perfect harmony with a God of mercy and love.
 - ▶ I like how C.S. Lewis put it. **Who said God is a safe lion? But he’s good.** He’s ferocious and mighty and yet he is good and righteous and long-suffering. This is how God is described in Scripture. He’s not safe but he’s good.

¹ Tim Keller, *The Reason for God*, 113.

- ❖ Well of all the chapters in Amos, it is this final chapter that best captures these polarities. As we walk through it, I want to bring three things to your attention: **1) A Terrifying Reality** in vv1-10, **2) A Rebuilt Kingdom** in vv11-15, and **3) A Global Mission** in v12.

A Terrifying Reality

- ❖ There is a terrifying reality being revealed in the first half of this passage. Amos receives a final vision in v1 of the Lord standing beside an altar. It's likely the altar in Bethel. About 180 years before, Jeroboam I led ten northern tribes to break away from Judah and form the nation of Israel. Since that day the kingdom David established was divided.
 - ▶ And in an attempt to deter his citizens from regularly traveling back to Judah, to the temple in Jerusalem, Jeroboam constructed an alternate temple in Bethel. He crafted a golden calf, built a new altar, and established a new priesthood. This was idolatry pure and simple but dressed up to mimic the true worship of the Lord. It became known as the "*Guilt of Samaria*" (8:14).
- ❖ Well their "Guilt" finally caught up with them. We read of the Lord calling for the destruction of the temple in Bethel. The capitals – the top of the pillars holding up the temple roof – will be struck and the entire structure will collapse on the heads of worshipers. And those who escape this calamity will fall victim to the sword. "*Not one of them shall flee away; not one of them shall escape.*"
 - ▶ **1) The terrifying reality being revealed – the reality we have to remember – is that escape from God's justice is impossible.**
- ❖ In the novel *Les Miserables*, the story's protagonist Jean Valjean is a thief – a reformed thief who has repented of his ways – but a thief none-the-less on the run from the law. And throughout the story he is perpetually hounded by a tireless, fanatical lawman named Javert.
 - ▶ Years go by. Valjean moves from city to city. He builds a new life for himself, a reputable life. But no matter how far he runs from his former life or how much he tries to atone for his past through kindness and charity, Valjean cannot escape the long arm of justice. Mysteriously and persistently, Javert is never far behind. He keeps showing up. Valjean can't seem to shake justice.
- ❖ That's Amos point. **No matter how far you run, no matter where you hide, or how much good you do with your life, you can't shake justice.** Justice will find you. No one shall escape. Of course that doesn't stop them from trying. In vv2-4 Amos lays out five conditional clauses each representing an attempt to escape God's reach, to shake his justice.
- ❖ If you try to dig down to Sheol to hide in the abode of the dead, God will find you. If you try to climb up to heaven to impress God, it won't change his mind. He'll drag you back down to face judgment. If you run to the mountain tops or dive to the ocean depths, he'll be there. Even if you submit to and satisfy man's justice – in v4 it says if you accept captivity – you will have satisfied your enemies but you'll still have to face God and his justice.

- ▶ **In the end, each way turns out to be futile. There is no way to escape an all-powerful, all-seeing, ever-present God.** That's Amos' point in vv1-4.
- ❖ Now most commentators think vv5-6 are actually stanzas from an ancient hymn the Israelites used to sing. They emphasize the power of God to execute judgment on his enemies. Notice in v5 he's called the "*Lord GOD of hosts*". In other words, he's the Heavenly Captain in command of the whole host of heaven. In his mere touch he has the power to dissolve nature and cause the earth to shake.
 - ▶ The Israelites used this hymn to celebrate God's power over their enemies, so it's totally ironic that it's now turned on them. They are now God's enemies. The Lord GOD of hosts will fix his eyes upon them for evil and not for good (v4).
- ❖ And then in vv7-10, the Lord knocks the legs out from under their flimsy theology that provided a false sense of security and confidence. This is a terrifying reality, especially for those under the pretense that they're special in God's eyes and exempt from his justice.
 - ▶ Amos' listeners were convinced that Israel had a special protected status. That explains why some in v10 were saying, "*Disaster shall not overtake or meet us.*" And why not? They were children of Abraham to whom God promised an eternal possession of the land (Gen. 13:14-18). And he personally brought them out from the land of Egypt in the Exodus (Ex. 14-15).
- ❖ Now Amos is not denying these facts. Israel is God's covenant people, but they have an imbalanced understanding of what that means. They're only focusing on God's blessings within this covenant relationship. They've forgotten (or perhaps they no longer believed) that curses were written into the covenant. We're talking about curses that would befall God's special people if they broke covenant with their disobedience. Nowhere in the covenant did it say they were exempt.
- ❖ So in v7 the Lord dispels that myth by demonstrating that, in one sense, Israel is no more special than any other nation on the earth. "*Are you not like the Cushites to me, O people of Israel?*" declares the LORD. "*Did I not bring up Israel from the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Caphtor and the Syrians from Kir?*"
 - ▶ Now this is not a statement of rejection. God's not saying to Israel that you're no longer a special people to me like you once were. **Instead it's a statement affirming that all nations are important to God and subject to his providence and care.**
- ❖ Israel put so much stock in their Exodus experience. This one experience of God's favor in the distant past led many to believe that special divine protection was a guarantee irrespective of their behavior.
 - ▶ But God tells us that Israel is not the only nation he has transplanted from one land and settled into another. He mentions similar exodus experiences for the Philistines and Syrians. No Israelite is arguing those experiences guarantees those nations divine protection irrespective of behavior. *So why make such a claim for yourself?*

- ❖ **So in a sense they're no different than any other nation. And even in the sense that Israel is special to God, as a chosen people, it doesn't exempt them.** They were not chosen for privilege or exemption but chosen for mission and responsibility. Their special status actually heaps more accountability on them, not less.
 - ▶ And because of their failure to keep covenant with God, to walk blamelessly before him, the LORD declares in v8, "*Behold, the eyes of the Lord GOD are upon the sinful kingdom, and I will destroy it from the surface of the ground, except that I will not utterly destroy the house of Jacob.*"

- ❖ Don't overlook that glimmer of hope there. "*I will not utterly destroy the house of Jacob.*" Finally good news! There will be a remnant. Amos spoke of a "*remnant of Joseph*" back in chapter 5:15. God will be faithful to his covenant with Israel by preserving a faithful remnant that keeps covenant.
 - ▶ And then in v9, we're given a new word picture to illustrate this concept. It's the picture of a sieve used to collect grain. "*For behold, I will command, and shake the house of Israel among all the nations as one shakes with a sieve, but no pebble shall fall to the earth.*"

- ❖ **The very imagery of a sieve suggests there are not only impurities in Israel that need to be purged but also good soil to be preserved.** This destruction being predicted is not coming for each and every sinner but for those sinners who convince themselves that disaster could never overtake them.
 - ▶ These sinners look into the past and the present and see nothing in their lives or in the behavior that would justify judgment. Nothing raises alarms. They look into the future but see no disaster waiting them. They look at their sin and have no fear. They have no concern for God's law by which they are condemned or for God's grace by which they could be saved. These are the sinners who will be sifted out.
 - But the remnant, true Israel, are cut from a different cloth. They know about God's sieve and long to make the cut. They know about God's plumb line and seek to measure up to his law. They are still sinners but sinners who love his law, strive for holiness, and rest in his grace.

- ❖ **Friends, there is a sieve waiting for us all.** The New Testament speaks of a great day at the end of this age where the earth will be purged (2 Pet. 3:8-10). And my fear is that many people in the church have convinced themselves that disaster shall not overtake them because they're banking on some experience of God's goodness and favor in the distant past.
 - ▶ So when they share their testimony they can only describe past acts of God's grace but have nothing to share about a present, living relationship with him. Or they have little fear of the sin in their lives.
 - They refuse to confess sin and twist Bible verses that promise forgiveness to fit their needs – not realizing that the Bible teaches that those who have been forgiven and truly saved from their sins will naturally (because of a new nature) loathe their sin and strive to walk blamelessly before the Lord.

- ❖ **The terrifying reality is that no one will escape God's justice.** It's impossible. You can't hide from God, even by denying that he exists. You can't shake his justice by doing more good with your life in hope of balancing out the bad. Justice will find you.

A Rebuilt Kingdom

- ❖ This is terrifying. But thankfully this is not the end of the chapter. We still have vv11-15 to consider. And here we see more hope – hope of restoration. We see a rebuilt kingdom. Look at v11, "*In that day I will raise up the booth of David that is fallen and repair its breaches, and raise up its ruins and rebuild it as in the days of old.*"
 - ▶ If these events take place “*in that day*” then it must be referring to another day after the day described in chapter 8:3 – the day of wailing and dead bodies everywhere! So judgment is coming. Judgment is first, but **2) We should trust that on the other side of judgment is restoration.**
- ❖ V11 speaks of a coming day when the kingdom will be restored. The fallen booth (or tent) of David is a reference to the breakup of the Davidic kingdom. And since then the northern and southern kingdoms had been in decline. But v11 describes a complete reversal. The kingdom will be unified once again.
 - ▶ And vv13-15 continue promising renewal and blessing on the land. In previous chapters Amos predicted famines, floods, earthquakes, and other calamities to plague the land. Very soon the nation will be “overtaken” by these things. But in that day of restoration, God’s people will be “overtaken” by immense blessings (v13).
 - As soon as the reapers has harvested one crop, the plowman comes right behind ready to plant another. The vineyards with its fruit and wine will flourish. It sounds like Eden all over again with curse nowhere to be found.
- ❖ **The promise is a complete reversal of all the calamity that Amos has been preaching.** The land will be renewed and flow with blessing. The kingdom will be united again. There will be only one kingdom, which means one king, one high priest, one temple. That’s their future hope.
 - ▶ And now if we take a step back from the book of Amos and interpret things in light of all Scripture, **we see that this great promise of restoration is fulfilled in none other than Jesus himself.**
- ❖ When he began his public ministry, the first words recorded out of his mouth were “*Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand.*” (Mt. 3:2) One of the central themes of Matthew’s Gospel is the restored kingdom whose king is Jesus. He is the one everyone was has been waiting for to take up David’s empty throne and restore his kingdom. Only then will God’s people dwell securely under the rule and reign of a good and sovereign King.
 - ▶ And not only is Jesus that one king to rule that one kingdom. He is also the kingdom’s one high priest who appeared once for all to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself (Heb. 9:26). And consequently he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them (Heb. 7:25).

- And he is the one temple. In the rebuilt kingdom, the temple is no longer a building but a person. If you want to meet God, if you want to worship God, if you want to pray to him – all that Israel would have normally done through the temple – we now do them through the person of Jesus. He is the true temple, the true dwelling of God.
- ❖ Now if you were to read Amos' prophecy by itself, you might come to the conclusion (if left to yourself) that the prophet was referring here in vv11-15 to something that would happen in the future specifically to the nation of Israel. There is a strand of biblical interpretation that reads a passage like this and says it has little relevance to the Church. It's only applicable to ethnic Israel. You, as a Christian, can be comforted that God keeps his promises to the Jews, but this promise of restoration in Amos 9 has nothing to do with you.
 - ▶ But the New Testament Church saw it differently. In Acts 15, there is a council held in Jerusalem to discuss the new work happening among them, namely the conversion of the Gentiles (nations). And in the course of their deliberation, James stood up and explained that this was God's plan all along.
 - ❖ Starting in Acts 15:14, James said, *"¹⁴Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name. ¹⁵And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written, [and here he quotes from Amos 9:11-12] ¹⁶"After this I will return, and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it, ¹⁷that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name, ¹⁸says the Lord, who makes these things known from of old."* (Acts 15:14-18)
 - ❖ **James had no trouble claiming that the prophecy of Amos was fulfilled in an already-sense by their day.** David's Son had already come. The High Priest had already offered his life as an atonement for sin. The King had already been raised from the dead and ascended on high to sit on a royal throne.
 - ▶ **So this restoration that Amos pronounces has everything to do with you if you're a Christian.** The promise to dwell securely within the strong walls of a new kingdom is yours in Christ! The promise to enjoy God's bounty and harvest, to be firmly planted and never to be uprooted again is yours in Christ!
 - ❖ Of course Amos did not know these details. All he knew and all he could tell the faithful remnant of Israel is that on the other side of judgment God promises restoration. He couldn't tell them how that would happen or who would bring it.
 - ▶ All he knew was that a terrifying judgment is coming for them. Justice will be satisfied. God will mess them up. And yet somehow he will show mercy and restore. **This delicate balance – this harmony between justice and mercy – is so unique and yet so inconceivable to so many.**

- ❖ Victor Hugo, who wrote *Les Miserables*, must not have believed such a balance could be achieved. Because even though justice keeps hounding Valjean throughout his life, in the end mercy trumps justice. In the end, justice, unable to reconcile itself with mercy, jumps into the River Seine. Valjean never gives an account for his past thievery.
 - ▶ Though it addresses a number of religious themes, *Les Mis* never captures the Gospel. The Gospel is unique in that sense. **Justice is served AND mercy is given.** The Lord Jesus mercifully died the death you should have died, and he lived the life you should have lived.
 - Escape from justice is impossible, which is why Jesus offers to bear it for you. And on the other side of that judgment comes restoration and renewal, of which Jesus mercifully lets you share and enjoy.

A Global Mission

- ❖ There is only a hint of this in Amos, but it is there. Vv1-10 revealed a terrifying reality, but vv11-15 painted a beautiful restoration. The only way that can be harmonized is in the Gospel – the good news of a kingdom come through the person and work of Christ Jesus.
 - ▶ And finally we see a global mission also hinted at in the end of this book, **3) To take this news of a kingdom come to the nations in hope that they might enter.**
- ❖ Look at vv11-12 again. “*In that day I will raise up the booth of David that is fallen and repair its breaches, and raise up its ruins and rebuild it as in the days of old, that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations who are called by my name,*” declares the LORD who does this.”
 - ▶ So the rebuilt kingdom will include the nation of Edom. The Edomites were descendants of Esau, the twin brother of Israel. Now you might wonder why Edom was specifically named. It’s because in the Old Testament Edom was sometimes used symbolically to stand, in general, for all opposing nations to Israel. That’s why the Greek Old Testament that James quotes from in Acts 15:17 reads “*the remnant of mankind*”.
- ❖ Remember again what triggered that council of the Jerusalem church in Acts 15. It was because a new work was happening before them – the Gentiles, the nations, were coming to faith in Jesus. And some actually thought that was unbiblical.
 - ▶ But the Apostles recognized that Amos hinted at this long ago. God was going to mercifully restore his chosen people. **But again they weren’t chosen for privilege or exemption. They were chosen for mission.** To take this message of judgment and restoration, of justice and mercy, all in Jesus – and proclaim it to the nations that they might believe with us and enter with us into the kingdom.
- ❖ Recently I went on a local missions trip with some college students from our congregation, and we learned a lot about the unreached peoples of the world. We learned that, according to some estimates, **2.84 billion people in the world are considered unreached by the Gospel. That’s 41% of the world’s population.**

- ▶ There are roughly 16,000 people groups in the world, and over 6,000 of them are unreached. They don't have a Bible in their language. They don't have established churches. And they have few to none foreign missionaries among them.
- ❖ The terrifying reality is that for these 2.84 billion people – justice is coming. They can't shake it. Because of their sin condition they incur the wrath of God. One day the Lion of Judah will pounce and consume them in righteousness. There will be no escape.
 - ▶ Unless they look to Jesus and find mercy. But they'll need someone to first bring them this news of a King and his kingdom that they might repent and believe and enter with us.
- ❖ Friends, I leave you with this challenge. If you yourself have entered the kingdom and bowed a knee to the King, then ask yourself, “***What will I do? What is my part in seeing this news of mercy and restoration spread about, especially to the unreached peoples of the world?***”
 - ▶ It can start local. In a minute you'll hear about this year's Compassion Project and the different ways you can serve and perhaps find opportunities to share this news locally. But I challenge you to also consider joining a short-term missions trip this summer and think globally. Or to consider investing a portion of your budget into the work that God is doing among the unreached peoples of the world.
- ❖ Go and have your eyes opened and your heart moved and discover that our not so tame God can mess up your life in more than one sense. There's a good chance he'll mess up all the dreams and plans you had set for your life. And that's a good thing.