



## **Authentic Living – Major Themes from the Minor Prophets Does God Change His Mind? (Amos)**

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Over the past number of months God had been laying some things on my heart concerning this next fall regarding the need to become a lot more intentional about making an impact on those around us and even world wide. As the staff, Elders and I have been talking about what to do in preparation for this, there has been a pull back to the Minor prophets in order to prepare our hearts for what God has in store for us. Remember they are called Minor prophets not because their words are minor in impact but because they were shorter in length. These are power books which pack a major punch when it comes to calling us to live a more authentic life as Christ followers.

As you have been reading through some of the Minor prophets and then discussing them in your Small Groups, how has the journey been so far? I have had people tell me that upon the first reading of a book, they had no idea what the author was talking about. Then in subsequent readings the prophet's comments begin to make a little more sense as they see their words in the context of the historical setting. Then as they read them again, they went 'Ouch, I didn't see that coming. Their words are so applicable to our day and actually God has been whispering things that apply directly to my life that I need to deal with myself.' For example, our first sermon was from the book of Hosea. What a weird story. Here is a story of a minister who was told to marry a lady with less than a stellar character. As we read along in the story, we follow her affairs, leaving him to come back when she was pregnant again and again and it broke our heart to watch. The story ends with him going down to the slave market and buying back his former wife who had been broken and scared by the choices she has made. Reading this, we saw the picture of this pastor placing his coat over her shoulders and saying 'It is time to come home and I love you.' We caught a glimpse of the depth and wonder of God's love for us. Then Glenn challenged us with what he called the 'Slow Fade', saying that what we often do is pull back from God and how God calls us back to Himself. David Friesen wrestled with the issue of trusting God even as we walk through the tough stuff and when the locus seem to have taken away things which are precious to us. Can we trust Him to care for us and see us through to good things again? This week we are looking at the first of two sermons from the book of Amos. I would have loved to be a fly on the wall as you read the first few chapters of this book. If I asked you to sum up what you read, you would have said 'God is back in town and He is really mad at everyone'. Well there is a little more to it than that.

First, let's find out a few things about the book and the Author because it will help us in our study this morning. The situation in Israel is that for the last 200 years the Jewish people have been split into 2 groups: Israel to the north and Judah to the south. Amos 1:1 says that under occupation on Amos' tax form would be written sheep rancher/sycamore-fig grower who lived in a town called Tekoa about 12 miles south of Jerusalem on the edge of the desert, north of the Dead Sea. He was a businessman who had to travel north to the big city to sell his wool and figs. Amos wasn't a preacher, he had never been to seminary at Taylor and he came from a town the size of Trochu.

On a business trip, something happened that changed his life. God placed in his heart a message that he couldn't shake and couldn't keep to himself. An old professor once said to me 'If you can do anything else but be a pastor, go and do it. But if you can't because of God's call on your life, get after it'. That was Amos' experience. Turn over to Amos 7:14-15. The date of this book is very precise. When you cross reference the dates of the kings mentioned with the date of the earthquake (which we know from Egyptian archeology which happened on June 15, 763 BC), we know that Amos received this word from God in exactly 765 BC. We know that he was a contemporary of Isaiah, Hosea and Jonah. This was a time of unprecedented wealth and prosperity. The economic situation in the country, the size of its borders, the affluence of the rich and the wealth of churches hadn't been this good since Solomon was king 200 years earlier. Yet in the middle of this great prosperity, we read Amos 1:2. For his opening remarks, he begins with the roar of a lion. A lion never roars when he is hunting or stalking its prey, just like with wolves who only howl when their prey is down and helpless to run away. This howl is coming from Zion where God was seen to reside and is heard all the way to Mt. Carmel to the north. It sounds like the fire from heaven is going to fall again like the time when Elijah prayed down fire from heaven that destroyed the bull and altar and left nothing but a smoldering scorched hole in the ground. As he said those words, you could almost see the people in the church audience sit up and say 'Man this farm boy can preach.'

### **First Sermon**

When I read this as a preacher, I sit back and say this is some brilliant preaching here. Now remember, Amos is preaching in Israel (9 tribes), the country to the north of his own country of Judah (3 tribes: Judah, Benjamin and Levi). Amos begins by doing two brilliant things. First he lists what God is going to do to six of the nations around Israel who have been warring against them who in the past have done some horrible things to them. You know the kind of sermon that when you hear it, you feel good because you can think of that other person (not you) that you were sure the preacher was talking about. Plus, he keeps repeating that strange line that I bet you kept wondering what he was talking about (verse 3 that said 'because of the three... actually make that four... God will get them). What he is doing there is using an old Jewish preaching technique. You see, the number three was seen to be the number of completion. In other words, for years God had been gracious toward them as these folks had been filling up their sin to a level that God said 'Okay, you are done. Your sin quota is reached and I now have to act in judgment on all of the wrong things you have done'. There is the 'three', the full complete level of sinning. Then, because God was gracious, He still sat back giving them more time, hoping they would repent and change their ways. They were given even more time, their 'four'. Having waited for the three and then for the four, he now has to act.

And so he begins to list the nations who lived around Israel who he would deal with because of the way they had sinned so terribly. He began with the dirty rotten Syrians whose capital was Damascus to the northeast of Israel because when you took over Gilead you used your iron hammers and mauls to literally crush the skulls of men,

women and children by the thousands. Their palaces and cities would be burned and the gates of Damascus left in smoldering ruins. The people of Israel gave a loud 'amen'. Then he moved on to Philistines in the Gaza to the southwest of Israel who had been a pain in their 'tush' since the time of Goliath. They had sacked Edom and sold their men and women into slavery. God said He would raise His hand of justice against them and level their country in ruins. The people yelled 'preach it brother'. And then Amos spoke words of prophesy against Tyre, Edom, Ammon (who cut babies out of their captive women's wombs and sacrificed them to their gods) and Moab (who God said for what they would do, He would burn their cities to the ground). By this time the people in the pews were standing up and yelling 'Hallelujah, what a preacher! Go get them God'.

Now let me stop for a moment and tell you that in those days, most times there were seven points to a good sermon. Why? Because it was the perfect number. So if you count how many nations Amos has preached against, Moab was number six. So the audience held their breath for the 'big ending'; the number seven group that God was going to punish. And when Amos in Amos 2:5 said 'because of the three great sins of Judah, make that four', they had to almost expand the size of the church because of how wide they were smiling. Judah was their 'holier than thou' cousins to the north. Look at what God's people (the people who had Jerusalem as their capital and the temple of Solomon as their church) were accused of (Amos 2:4, 5). Wow. And while they didn't shout Hallelujah, they all nodded that there could be no better way to end a sermon than with those words. So they began to pick up their bibles and zip up their purses so that when the last hymn was sung they could go to the Swiss Chalet for lunch. When Amos kept on preaching, you could almost hear them say 'That is the problem with guys that don't go to seminary, they don't know when to quit. Surely he must know that you end at your seventh point'. And then as he speaks, their mouths start to hang open and it isn't long until you hear someone say 'he quit preaching a while ago, now he is just meddling'. Listen to Amos 2:6-8. They sit there in stunned silence wondering what just happened as the sermon had begun so well.

## **The Issue**

Amos 3:1 To their complete amazement, God is calling them to account just like everyone else. Why?

Amos 2:9-11 Like a good parent, contrary to how you have acted toward me 'I was always on your side'. Just to make this personal, hasn't God always been there for us not matter how we have treated Him?

Amos 3:1, 2 'Israel, I chose you out of all the peoples of the world. I have treated you like a special adopted child. You have had the privilege of being closest to me so I can't let your rebellion go unchallenged.' Let me ask you again, do you relate to this statement? Has God been extra good to you or sought you out and spoiled you in many ways? So is it fair how you have been treating him?

God is saying to Israel that while you don't understand this, in the middle of all the fun you are having you are just moments from having the worst day of your lives. I am coming to judge you, unless you take heed of what I am saying to you today.

### **So how does this apply to us today?**

#### **1. In Riches Don't Assume that all is Going Well**

I think that as Amos spoke, those in church that day sat with their mouth wide open and thought 'Surely this farm boy from the south couldn't have it right. Just look around. Our borders are the largest they have been in 200 years, politically we are stable, commerce is booming, churches are all in building projects and growing and oil is over \$140 a barrel once again! Surely this is a sign that God is blessing us and He is pleased with how we are doing.' Now let's be honest. Sometimes God does bless us materially and when that happens it is wonderful. The problem was that while Israel was prospering from the outside, inside it was decaying. The scary thing is that once people lose respect for God it isn't long until they lose respect for the people around them. Their personal needs become more important than the needs of others. Getting what we want becomes more important than giving to those who have needs around us. Look back at Amos 2:6-8. The rich are ripping off the poor. If you have the more expensive lawyer you can easily rip off the poor guy (Banks in the United States sold houses to people that should never have gotten them. Then when things went bad they took the houses back, kept the people's money and then gave bonus' to the bank executives). Try and find justice there. Religiously they watered down the truth by watering down the preachers. Amos 2:12 Nazirites and the preachers decided to not ruffle people's feathers so it wouldn't affect friendships, employment and offerings and religion got sick. Any of this sound familiar to you? Here in Calgary we often define success by how large our bank account is, how big our houses are or the position we hold. We can easily define success as pastors by the size of our buildings, budgets and attendance instead of the depth of our heart and our passion to love Jesus and honestly touch our world. And here is the hard thing for us today. If everything is going well it is obvious that we may have been overlooking something. That is the call of the book of Amos. Don't get sucked into the false idea which we all wish was true; that in riches (in the good times & abundance) it means that God is pleased with all we are doing. You and I know all too well that sometimes in the good times we spend more time playing with things than getting involved in what God wants us to be involved in and spending on ourselves instead of using what God has given us to share with others. Sometimes this means spending money on things which lead us deeper into areas which will ruin our marriages and at times our lives. In the good times it is easier to rely on ourselves instead of walk in need toward God. And, if we are honest, it is easier to not see the signs of decay in our lives.

In Gordon MacDonald's book 'Ordering your Private World', he talks about what he calls the sink hole syndrome. He describes a beautiful church which that was built on a hill that one day started to show cracks in its foundation. It wasn't long until those cracks began to run across the main floor of the sanctuary, into the classrooms and up some of

the walls of the church. When they came in to see what they could do to fix it, they realized that the church had been built over a coal mine's shafts which were beginning to settle and literally pull the building in four different directions. Before long, despite its beautiful appearance, it pulled itself apart and collapsed from within. Do you remember the parable Jesus told in Matthew 7 of a foolish man who built his house on the sand? I'll bet it probably looked even more impressive than the one that had been built up on the rock. But the foundation was flawed and no matter how elegant it looked or how expensive the light fixtures were, it fell flat when the storms of life hit. Amos is yelling as loud as he can to us to check our foundation. Check to make sure that you haven't just assumed that the size of your bank account (or toys you have and the stuff you have around you) equals a firm spiritual foundation. One that will take you through the shifting winds of time, right into eternity. Or, that you are walking in a way that makes God smile and makes a real difference in your world.

I sat with a friend the other day in a pub and he asked me how I know when I am walking in the path God wants me to walk? That is always hard to answer, but it is the right question to ask. If Israel had asked that question instead of presuming that because they had stuff they were living right spiritually, God would never have had to come to them and yell 'Time. I can't let you live like this any longer. Justice demands my harsh intervention in your life'. Can I say this gently? Some of you here today are sitting right there because of something that you are playing with that is now playing with you and as you look around you see the cracks appearing all around you. Amos would say 'Do business with God today before it is too late'.

## **2. In Despair Don't Assume that all is Hopeless**

For some, today as you hear these words, your heart is in your throat saying 'Oh God, please don't give me what I deserve'. And others are going 'When I look at the stuff I am going through, it feels like either God is at me or the devil is taking a run at me'. With the stuff the Spate's have been going through lately, it would be easy to go there wouldn't it? How do you tell the difference? Simply lay your life before the Lord and ask Him. Say 'Lord, if there is something I need to confess or get right with you, tell me and I will do it?' And because He is God, He can easily bring things to our mind which we need to deal with. If He brings nothing to mind which is wrong, then simply ask for His care during the situation and protecting from the evil one. For as CS Lewis said 'Pain is God's megaphone to rouse a sleeping world' (to do business with God). Sometimes He has to drive us out of the nursery so we will grow up and sometimes He uses suffering to do that. So off the top, if God seems to be telling you that what is happening is simply the 'stuff of life' or to help you grow, then run to Him and ask for His care and as David said last week, trust Him.

But if God brings something to mind that needs to be dealt with:

1. Don't ignore His warning. Amos 4:6 Remember what we found in Amos 1? He will give us at times the three count and then the four (some extra grace). But then He will act. One man has said the same sun that melts butter hardens clay. If we feel God nudging us to get things right with Him, don't put it off. If we keep sticking our fingers in our ears, we need to know that God will eventually do business with us. When Matt did

something wrong as a kid, we would say 'go to your room'. He would reply 'I will play with my toys'. So we would say 'Then go lay down on your bed'. He would then say 'Then I will just read'. If we would say 'No books', he would reply 'Then I will sleep'... Here's a hint. When we keep doing that to God, eventually God will do that kind of business with us. So don't ignore his warnings.

2. Don't be afraid of His care. Amos 5:4 'Seek me and live' I love that, for I have from experience, found that this is the heart of God. The book of Amos was written not because God wanted to hurt His people but because He wanted them to run back toward Him.

3. Call on Him today. Amos 7:1-3 When you first read this, it looks like God is changing his mind and finally being nice to Israel. Actually, from the very beginning God has been first caring, then coaxing, then yelling and finally using tough love because He so desperately wants us to live authentic, full lives. He doesn't want us to keep settling for second best.

4. Enjoy the blessings. Amos 9:13-15 When you obey, you get things right with Him and He is then free to bless us. We know that those blessings may come in all kinds of forms and that has been His dream for us from the very beginning. Not a bad word from a farm boy from Trochu was it?

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