

Amos 3

'Three Great Principles and One Gracious God'

Prophets of Doom

Friends, I want to begin tonight's talk by quoting a number of passages from the Old and the New Testaments.

Each passage has to do with speaking God's words.

And as I read them, I want you to ask yourself what is common about these passages.

The first one comes from Isaiah 30:10-11:

*They say to the seers, "See no more visions!"
and to the prophets, "Give us no more visions of what is right!
Tell us pleasant things, prophesy illusions.
Leave this way, get off this path, and stop confronting us with the Holy One of Israel!" [Isaiah 30:10-11, NIV]*

The second comes from Jeremiah 6:10:

*To whom can I speak and give warning? Who will listen to me?
Their ears are closed so they cannot hear.
The word of the LORD is offensive to them; they find no pleasure in it. [Jeremiah 6:10, NIV]*

The third comes from the New Testament; from 2 Timothy 4:1-3:

In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. [2 Timothy 4:1-3, NIV]

So, there are the three quotations.

What is it that is common between them?

What similarities in sentiment are there?

The passages are clear, aren't they?

God is a God who often has hard things to say to his people.

And people do not like hearing hard things.

And so people often shut their eyes to good people saying hard things.

Or they persecute and kill the messenger.

However, there is another response that we can make.

This response is outlined for us in Micah 2:6-7.

Let me read it to you.

*"Do not prophesy," their prophets say.
"Do not prophesy about these things; disgrace will not overtake us."
Should it be said, O house of Jacob: "Is the Spirit of the LORD angry? Does he do such things?"
"Do not my words do good to him whose ways are upright? [Micah 2:6-7, NIV]*

God is clear.

His words are sometimes hard.

They are often full of doom and judgment.

However, God's intentions for his people are always good.

And so, if God has a hard word to say to his people, it will always do good to those whose ways are upright.

Godly people will respond to God's hard words with thanks.

For God's words come from a good God whose intentions for his people are good.

Friends, tonight we are going to find some hard words from God coming from the mouth of his prophet, Amos.

Amos is going to tell us some hard things from God.

And as we listen, I want to urge you to have the response of the godly.

For these words from Amos will lead us to great things.

They will do good for us.

This is God's intention for us.

Three great principles

Introduction

The passage we are looking at tonight is Amos 3.

Amos 3 can be divided into three sections: verses 1-2; verses 3-8, and verses 9-12.

Each of these verses opens up a clear biblical principle.

And each of these principles travels down to us in our day.

So, let's get started with the first principle in Amos 3:1-2.

Principle 1

- Amos 3:1-2

Verse 1 starts with some words that will echo through the next few chapters.

He urges the people of God to 'Hear this word...'

He then sets the context by telling us who the word is directed to – the people of Israel, the whole family he brought up out of Egypt.

The reference to Egypt is a reference to God's great act of redemption for his people.

He brought his people up out of bondage in Egypt.

And after he had rescued them out of Egypt, he renewed his covenant with them.

He told them in Exodus 19 that they would be his treasured possession, his kingdom of priests, his holy nation.

Verse 2 picks this up.

The word 'chosen' is actually the word 'know' in the original language.

It is a covenant word that is full of intimacy.

It means that he is acknowledging that Israel is his covenant partner and that he has an obligation toward them.

The people of Amos's day thought that this obligation meant that evil would not overtake them or come near to them (Amos 9:10).

They felt at ease, confident, and complacent (Amos 6:1).

What Amos does is that turns this on its head.

He is saying that Israel's relationship with God had two sides to it.

It had obligations.

The people of God were to be faithful to God and obedient to his word.

His gift to them demanded a shift in their behaviour.

Their obedience to him was to flow from his grace to them.

And if they were not obedience, his relationship with them meant that they were culpable for their breaches in relationship.

And if he were truly their covenant partner, then he must act in judgment.

He must punish them for all their sins, for all their breaches of covenant obligation.

So, Amos 3:1-2 shows us the first great principle.

The principle is that God's election implies accountability.

Let me say it again: God's election implies accountability.

God's people are accountable.

They are his elect people, which means that they are to act in accord with that relationship.

This means that they are to keep his laws and act according to his character.

And God is accountable.

He too is to act according to his relationship.

And this means that he must punish covenant disobedience when it is present.

- Applicable to us

Now, let me say that this principle of covenantal accountability applies just as well to us as it did to Israel.

Because of Jesus, we are in a new covenant with God, based on a greater rescue and a greater sacrifice.

We are God's people.

He has called us his children and allowed us to call him our Father (Galatians 4:1-4).

We are the new people of God who have been brought out of darkness into his marvellous light (1 Peter 2:9-10).

And being God's people means that we are called upon to act like it.

We are to keep his laws and act according to his character.

We are to abstain from sinful desires that wage war against our souls.

And we are to live good lives among the pagans (1 Peter 2:11-12).

But as Jesus said in Luke 12:48:

From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked. [Luke 12:48, NIV]

You see, the point that Amos makes is as true for us as it was for the ancient Israel.

We are God's covenant partners.

We are God's people and will be held accountable.

But is also accountable.

He too is to act according to his relationship.

And this means that he must punish covenant disobedience when it is present.

Principle 2

- Amos 3:3-8

Okay, that brings us to our second section and our second principle.

We are going to look at Amos 3:3-8.

You will have already noticed that Amos likes the number 7.

He uses it time and time again.

And one of the twists he likes to make is to use the number 7 in such a way that people think that he has completed what he wants to say.

And just when they are breathing a sigh of relief, he turns things on their head and adds a surprising eighth element.

He does that in these verses.

He lists seven causes that occur in the natural world.

And whenever these causes occur, there is a following result.

So, people do not walk together, unless they have an agreement to meet.

Lions don't roar unless they are hunting or have captured some prey.

Birds don't swoop on traps unless the bait has been set.
Traps don't spring shut unless a victim is present in the trap.
Trumpets don't sound in alarm without causing fear.
Disasters don't come to cities unless God has initiated it.
Amos knows his audience agrees with him.
These causes are followed by these effects.
And then Amos adds the final cause and effect: If God speaks, then who can but prophesy?
Amos was like many of the Old Testament prophets.
He appears to have been a somewhat reluctant prophet.
But the Lord took him and told him to prophesy (Amos 7:15).
But, like Jeremiah, the word of God is in him like a fire shut up in his bones (Jeremiah 20:7-9).
He cannot hold it in.
If God speaks, so must his prophet, no matter what the consequences.
So, this is our second principle.
If God has chosen people to speak his word, and then he speaks, then those people must speak that word.
Let me say that again.
If God has chosen people to speak his word, and then he speaks, then those people must speak that word.

- Applicable to us

Now, again, let me say that I think that this principle applies in the New Testament as well.

The apostles are clear in Acts 4 and 5 that they are under command to speak about Jesus.

In 1 Corinthians 9:16 Paul says:

Yet when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, for I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! [1 Corinthians 9:16, NIV]

And 1 Peter 2:9-10 tells us that we are God's new people of God and that God has called in order that we might declare the great deeds of him who has brought us out of darkness into his marvellous light.

God has spoken in Jesus Christ.

And we must speak of him and what he has done.

Principle 3

- Amos 3:9-15

Let's now turn to Amos 3:9-15 and principle 3.

In verse 9, Amos tells us that God gathers two witnesses to assemble on the mountains of Samaria. He is about to make an accusation and according to Old Testament law, an accusation has to have two or three witnesses.

The witnesses are pagan nations – Ashdod, representing Philistia, and Egypt.

Both nations can be considered to be independent, expert, experienced, and competent witnesses.

And God's accusation before the witnesses is strong and powerful.

His people are those who do not know how to do right.

They are incapable of acting in an upright and godly fashion.

And then Amos hones in on the particular culprits he has in mind.

They appear to members of the upper class of Samaria who hoard plunder and loot.

The terms Amos uses are well known terms and they often have connotations of violence and lawlessness.

In verse 11, Amos announces judgment and his language is very clever.

In verses 9 and 10 he has talked about fortresses.

The representatives of foreign fortresses are invited to witness the current crimes in Samaria. They are to bear witness concerning the crimes committed against people and property. They are to see how the results of these crimes are stored in Israelite fortresses. And God announces that an unknown enemy will come and in turn will plunder these fortresses. The punishment will fit the crime. As they have amassed their wealth through plunder, so they will in turn be plundered. Verse 12 tells just how complete the punishment will be. A shepherd might grab a piece of a lamb's carcass in order to prove that a lion took the lamb. But the devastation on Israel will be so severe that there will be no remaining bits to be salvaged. Verse 13 spells out the judgment even more fully. Bethel was one of the significant religious sanctuaries for Israel. The altars there were places of asylum. By going to the altar and hanging on the horns of the altar, people could seek refuge in God. Altars were also places of sacrifice. But here God promises that he will destroy these altars. In other words, God will destroy the places where Israel can go for asylum and forgiveness. And then in verse 15 he will strike at the symbols of their opulence. He will tear down their pleasure estates and holiday houses. Their houses festooned with the symbols of their wealth and ill-gotten gains will be destroyed. So, what is the principle here? Well, the principle is that God's generosity toward his people is to be met with generosity from his people. Let me repeat that. God's generosity toward his people is to be met with generosity from his people. We saw this last week, didn't we? We saw that God had been generous and kind but that God's people had been stingy and mean.

- Applicable to us

Now let me say again that the principle we see here is one that is reiterated in the New Testament. We are people who have received grace. God has forgiven us. God has accepted us. Though we were spiritually poor, God poured out his grace upon us so that we might become rich. Throughout the New Testament, we are urged to be gracious to each other in response to God's grace. As he has forgiven us, we are to forgive others. As he has accepted us, we are to accept others. As he has been generous with us spiritually, we are to be generous with others materially and financially. Those who are rich are to be instructed to be generous.

How to treat these principles

First, they are...

So, there we have three great principles from Amos. The first principle is that God's election implies accountability. The second is that if God has chosen people to speak his word, and then he speaks, then those people must speak that word. The third is that God's generosity toward his people is to be met with generosity from his people. So, how are we to treat these principles?

Well, the first thing to say is that these principles are the way that we will be judged.
We are God's people and God will judge us for our actions.
He will judge us for how we, the elect people of God have lived in response to our election.
Romans 11 makes this clear, as do many other parts of the New Testament.
He will judge us for whether or not we have faithfully spoken his word.
Paul knows that as far as his ministry is concerned.
In 1 Corinthians 9 he says, 'Woe to me if I do not preach'.
In 2 Timothy 4, he tells Timothy that he should preach the word knowing that God will judge the living and the dead.
And in relation to the third principle, Jesus makes clear in a variety of places that the measure that we have received will provide the measure by which we will be judged on the last day (e.g. Matthew 7:2; Luke 6:38; cf. Matthew 18:21-35).
So, we should know that these principles are the principles by which God will judge us.
He will want to know how we have acted as his covenant partners.
How have we spoken his word?
How have we responded to his generosity?

Second, they are not...

So, these principles are principles by which God will judge us.
But let me tell you the other side of the story.
You see, my reading of the New Testament and the Old Testament is that these principles are not our motivation.
God is not waving a stick at us by way of motivating us to obedience.
No.
God's way of motivation is not law but grace.
Let me look at each of these principles and notice something in the New Testament about them.
First of all, when New Testament people think of God's election, it is a motivation for thanksgiving and rejoicing.
In 1 Thessalonians 5:24 we are told that if God has chosen us then he will be faithful and keep us to the end.
And so, as God's people we eagerly wait for the appearing of Jesus.
For his appearance is our blessed hope (Titus 2:10-14).
It motivates us not to fear but to joy.
And what about the principle of speaking.
Both Paul and apostles are clear.
They may be under command to speak about Jesus.
But they don't speak about Jesus because they are under command.
They speak about Jesus because they want to and because they can't do anything else.
And so the apostles say in Acts 4:20, 'We cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.'
And Paul says he preaches voluntarily rather than under compulsion.
And what about the principle of generosity.
It is interesting that in relation to money, Paul tells the Corinthians in 2 Corinthians 9:7 that they should not give under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.
In other words, generosity is something that flows from the heart, from God's generosity to us.
Can you see what I'm saying?
The motivation for our actions as God's people is not the stick of God's judgment.
It is the grace God has shown to us in Christ.

So...

So, this leaves us with one question.

What happens if we hear what Amos has to say and what Jesus has to say and what the New Testament authors have to say and realise how far short we fall of God's requirements?

What happens when we realise our sinfulness?

Should we just beat ourselves up to do better?

No.

The New Testament is clear.

When we realise our shortcomings...

When we realise that we stand under God's judgment and fall far short...

Then we should flee to God's grace and forgiveness.

And as he forgives us yet again, we should turn to our neighbour and our world and act as God has acted towards us.

We are people of grace.

Let's act as though we have received grace.