

The Country Preacher Who Came to Town

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In the days of Amos (8th century B.C.) God's message through this remarkable prophet dealt with the fact that God's people were breaking His laws, which He had given "that it may go well with you and your children after you forever" (Deuteronomy 12:28). Amos was angry at the violence they had done to the justice and the righteousness of God.

Since Amos and the little book that bears his name may be unfamiliar to you, let me set the stage by quoting the section of Scripture that we will be looking at in this very interesting chapter.

Thus He showed me: Behold, the Lord stood on a wall made with a plumb line, with a plumb line in His hand. And the LORD said to me, "Amos, what do you see?" And I said, "A plumb line." Then the Lord said: "Behold, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of My people Israel; I will not pass by them anymore. The high places of Isaac shall be desolate, and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste. I will rise with the sword against the house of Jeroboam." Then Amaziah the priest of Bethel sent to Jeroboam king of Israel, saying, "Amos has conspired against you in the midst of the house of Israel. The land is not able to bear all his words. For thus Amos has said: 'Jeroboam shall die by the sword, and Israel shall surely be led away captive from their own land.' " Then Amaziah said to Amos: "Go, you seer! Flee to the land of Judah. There eat bread, and there prophesy. But never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is the royal residence." Then Amos answered, and said to Amaziah: "I was no prophet, nor was I a son of a prophet, but I was a sheepbreeder and a tender of sycamore fruit. Then the LORD took me as I followed the flock, and the LORD said to me, 'Go, prophesy to My people Israel.' Now therefore, hear the word of the LORD: You say, 'Do not prophesy against Israel, and do not spout against the house of Isaac.' "Therefore thus says the LORD: 'Your wife shall be a harlot in the city; your sons and daughters shall fall by the sword; your land shall be divided by survey line; you shall die in a defiled land; and Israel shall surely be led away captive from his own land.' "

(Amos 7:7-17)

Six miles south of Bethlehem is Tekoa. It is little wonder if you have never heard of it. Figuratively, it is a wide spot in the road, a whistle-stop on a branch line. Today it is a ghost town. The name *tekoa* means "a camping ground." It was not much more than that even in its heyday. It was a country place. Using the common colloquialism of the day, it was the jumping-off place. Years ago I heard a man say that to reach the place where he was born you go as far as possible by buggy, then you get off and walk two miles. That's Tekoa also.

Tekoa is the birthplace of Amos. This fact is the little town's only claim to greatness. It is true that one of David's mighty men was born there. But the thing that gives it character and notoriety is that Amos the prophet was born in Tekoa.

Now Tekoa is on the edge of a most frightful wilderness. Tekoa is situated on a ridge on the extreme edge of the inhabited area overlooking that wilderness, a wilderness that extends down to the Dead Sea, going down and down and down. You can stand there and see the Dead Sea. You can turn in the other directions and look on the other side of the ridge toward Hebron, then down into the Negev where there is more wilderness. Any way you turn you see wilderness, but the wilderness down toward the Dead Sea is the most frightful of all.

It is a desert wilderness where wild animals howl at night. By day the only thing you can see is the ground spotted by the remains of Bedouin camps—just the blackened ground left by nomads, vagabonds of the desert passing through. No one lives there. It was Dr. Adam Smith who said, “The men of Tekoa looked out upon a desolate and haggard world.” That’s the picture. You couldn’t live in a worse place than Tekoa, my friend. And this was the hometown of Amos the prophet.

Amos tells us that he was a herdsman or sheepbreeder. The word that is used is an unusual one. It actually has to do with the sheep he was herding, which were a peculiar strain of sheep noted for their fine wool and bred only in the desert. They were hardy and rugged—the only kind that could live in such a place. I am told that today in that same wilderness one may see Bedouins herding that same breed of sheep.

To supplement a meager income, this man tells us something else that he did. He was a gatherer of sycamore fruit. To be more accurate, the word is “nipper”—he was a nipper of sycamores. The variety of sycamores that grew at a lower level in Tekoa was a kind of fig, growing on tall, heavily foliated trees. The fruit was inferior, and because it did not ripen easily, a nipper treatment was adopted to hasten the ripening. That was what Amos did. He was a fruit picker and a herdsman out there.

In other words, he really did not come from the town of Tekoa. That would have been bad enough. He came from deep in that wilderness. His sheep and his sycamores pushed him way out into that terrible desert. He was a country boy; he was a rustic; he was a hayseed. But don’t let that fool you. This man Amos had the greatest world view of any of the prophets. Just because you don’t like the way he dressed or where he came from, don’t think he was a fool. This man had a message, an ecumenical message and a long-range point of view. Listen to him:

Then the LORD took me as I followed the flock, and the LORD said to me, “Go, prophesy to My people Israel.” (Amos 7:15)

God’s seminary was in the solitude of the desert. That is where God, from the beginning, has trained His men. Remember that when God called Abraham, who was a city slicker from Ur of the Chaldees, God brought him to a wilderness near Hebron. That was a place where a man could be alone with God. It was there that Abraham raised his altar to God. The desert seems to be God’s training ground.

Also, Moses was reared in a palace—educated in the greatest university of his day, the University of the Sun, which would compare favorably with our modern universities. But with all of his education and accomplishments God couldn’t use him. So He sent him out to the backside of the desert of Midian and gave him a forty-year course. That is where God trained him.

David, a shepherd boy, was brought as a musician into the palace of King Saul. But God could not let him be educated there. He could not use David, grown soft from court life. God used the jealousy of the king to force him into the wild mountains and lonely caves of a wilderness existence. In such a setting God trained His king.

John the Baptist was out in the desert until his appearing to the nation. The apostle Paul, after his conversion, went into the desert of Arabia where God trained him. The apostle John was put on the Isle of Patmos so God could give him the Book of the Revelation. Such is God’s method with His men.

Out on the desert God called Amos to preach. He gave him a message, then He sent him to Bethel to give His Word to Israel.

When Amos arrived in Bethel, I think folk on the street exchanged smiles. To get this down where we live, let's say that he was wearing his first pair of hard-soled shoes. He was wearing his first necktie, and he was always loosening it because he had never worn a necktie before. But when you go up to Bethel, you must have a necktie, you know. When the pulpit committee met him, they were embarrassed. They had heard he was a great preacher, but they had not expected him to be so countrified. Everyone was embarrassed except Amos. He had come up to give God's message, and he was going to give it.

You see, Bethel was the capital of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. It was there that Jeroboam had erected one of his golden calves. This was the center of false religion. While it was the center of cults, it was also the center of culture. Bethel was sophisticated. Folk were blasé; they were uptown; they were really citified in Bethel. What was done in Bethel was the thing to do. Bethel had influence. The styles that were worn in Bethel were imitated.

The suit Amos wore was not cut according to the pattern of Bethel, and neither were his sermons cut according to the pattern of Bethel.

This man has now left the back country and has come to the boulevards. He has left the desert of Tekoa and has come to the drawing rooms of Bethel. He is out of place. He knows all about raising long-haired sheep, but he doesn't know much about these well-groomed sleek "sheep" to whom he is to give God's message in Bethel. He has left the place of agriculture and has come into the city of culture. The country preacher has come to town.

Now almost everybody came to hear him at first because word had gotten around, "If you want to be entertained, go hear Amos! You ought to see the suit he's wearing—and that necktie!" They came for amusement, but they left in anger, at least most of them did. He was a sensational preacher.

Today I know a great many preachers who say they do not like sensational subjects or sensational preaching. Their criticism stems from a personal inability. The reason they don't like it is that they cannot produce it. Amos was sensational. As he preached the Word of God, people were moved. A few turned to God. Bethel was stirred.

You probably know what happened. It happened then; it happens today. Organized religion tried to silence him. The denominational leaders called a meeting. They said, "We've got to remove him. We will withdraw our support from him. Has anyone talked to him about his losing his pension if he doesn't stop this type of preaching? We do not preach this way in Bethel, and we cannot permit him to preach like that!" Even some of the fundamental leaders—"evangelicals" as they happily call themselves—were jealous and began to criticize him. They tried to undermine his ministry by circulating false reports about him. However, in spite of it all, God blessed him. Amos would not compromise. He would not shut his eyes to evil.

A mass meeting of all the false religions was called. Their motto was, "Away with Amos," and placards were carried reading "Go home, Amos! Go home!"

They decided to appoint a man to go talk to him. Amaziah, the false priest, the hired hand of idolatry, was their choice. He was, I think, one of the biggest rascals you will find on (or off) the pages of Scripture. He was an ecclesiastical politician, and these boys always move cleverly.

Now Amos is a very strong preacher. He does not mince words. He does not pull any punches. He speaks what God has instructed him to say. Listen to him in Amos 7:

The high places of Isaac shall be desolate, and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste. I will rise with the sword against the house of Jeroboam. (v. 9)

Now watch this religious rascal, Amaziah, move:

Then Amaziah the priest of Bethel sent to Jeroboam king of Israel, saying, “Amos has conspired against you in the midst of the house of Israel. The land is not able to bear all his words.” (v. 10)

Notice his maneuver:

For thus Amos has said: “Jeroboam shall die by the sword...” (v.11)

Let me ask you, friend, is that what Amos said? No, he had not said that. His actual words were that God had said, “I will rise with the sword against the house of Jeroboam.” And if you follow the record, you will find that this pronouncement was accurate. Too bad that Jeroboam II did not believe what Amos had actually said, because his grandson will be slain with the sword, and that will end his kingly line. Notice that Amos had not said that Jeroboam would perish by the sword. You see, these ecclesiastical politicians twist the truth. It is true that Amos had said something about the sword, but not that Jeroboam would die by the sword as Amaziah intentionally misquoted. Such a twisting of the truth is the worst kind of lying.

You see what Amaziah is doing—he is getting the authorities on his side before he moves in on the prophet. Though I cannot prove this, I do not think he moved alone. Such men do not move alone; they move by committees. And I think he took a committee with him. My guess is there was a committee of three, with Amaziah as chairman. Dr. Sounding Brass was on the committee. He was president of the School of the Prophets—false prophets. He was pompous and proud, an ecclesiastical politician to his fingertips. Though he himself could not preach, he was teaching other young men how to preach. Also there was Rev. Tinkling Cymbal, pastor of the wealthiest and most influential church in Bethel. He was the yes-man of the rich. He couldn't preach, either, but he was a great little mixer. Oh, he was skilled at shaking hands and backslapping and attending knife and fork clubs. And if the company was right, he didn't mind taking a cocktail. His aim was to win friends. Here, then, is the committee that waits upon Amos: Amaziah, priest of the Golden Calf; Dr. Sounding Brass; and Rev. Tinkling Cymbal.

Oh, my friend, what a scene! Here is our prophet. He is God's man, but he does not have his hair styled, and he does not wear the correct clothes. He is country; he's from the wilderness of Tekoa. He is not accustomed to drawing rooms and committee meetings.

Here comes the committee to wait on Amos. Amaziah—the polished, cultured scholar with the rapier of ridicule and an air of condescension—addresses Amos as *seer*. What sarcasm! As you know, these ecclesiastical politicians are very polite on the surface, but, oh, they can be ugly underneath! Amaziah continues, “Go, flee away.” What he means is, “Get out of town! Get lost. We do not want you here anymore.”

Then he makes this nasty insinuation, “Flee to the land of Judah. There eat bread, and there prophesy.” In other words, “After all, Amos, you are doing this for the money. And if you go back to your hometown, you will probably be able to get good offerings there. Why don't you leave here?” What a cutting thing to say to God's man!

Then his crowning insult: “But never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king’s sanctuary, and it is the royal residence.” His satirical suggestion is, “Do you realize, Amos, that you are no preacher? Do you realize that you are speaking here at the ‘First Baptist Church,’ the most prominent and influential church in the denomination? Do you know that the king attends this church? His pew is right over there. Your messages have been disturbing him. He likes to come here and nap, but he hasn’t been able to sleep with you preaching. And some of the people don’t like you. You don’t flatter them enough. You do not mix well, Amos. Neither are you as dignified as you should be. We have noticed that you pound the pulpit. That is very crude in Bethel. We do not like your emotional outbursts. We never get excited about religion here. And by the way, Amos, did you ever study homiletics? Your messages lack organization. You need a course in public speaking, which will train you to speak with a deep voice in a very dignified manner so that you can say nothing as if it were something. Amos, you are no longer welcome at Bethel.”

Now the answer of Amos reveals the heart of this prophet.

Then Amos answered, and said to Amaziah: “I was no prophet, nor was I a son of a prophet, but I was a sheepbreeder and a tender of sycamore fruit. Then the LORD took me as I followed the flock, and the LORD said to me, ‘Go, prophesy to My people Israel.’” (Amos 7:14, 15)

Friend, that is not the answer of a fanatic, is it? It is a soft answer. You may think he is crude by the way he dresses, but his answer reveals refinement. Looking back over twenty-five hundred years, he stands in better light than does Amaziah. It is the gracious answer of a gentleman.

There is only one criticism I can make of Amos, and I trust I will be forgiven for making this one. He is naive; he is artless; he is frank; he is just a babe-in-the-woods in Bethel. Down yonder in the desert wilderness of Tekoa, he knew his way around. He could travel through the darkness of that desert guided by the stars. Read his prophecy and you will find that he knew those stars well. He knew about the roar of a lion, then the scream of a helpless animal that had fallen into its clutches. He refers to this in his prophecy. He knew the telltale movement in the brush and the hiss of a venomous serpent. He was at home in the jungle filled with wild animals, but in the asphalt jungle of Bethel he was helpless.

If someone will just lead Amos around and say, “Amos, there is the roar of a lion!”

“Roar of a lion? I don’t hear the roar of a lion, and I *know* lions.”

“Yes, but up here in Bethel that lion is Mr. Gotrocks. He didn’t like that message you gave because the shoe fit him, and he is roaring from the pinch. He’s a lion. He has influence. He will eat you up!”

“You don’t mean to tell me that a Christian brother ... why, I’m giving God’s message ... he wouldn’t eat me up, would he?”

“Be careful, Amos; don’t step there. You almost stepped on a serpent!”

“Serpent? I don’t see a serpent. All I see is Mrs. Joe Doaks. You don’t mean to tell me ...”

“Yes, she is a serpent in this asphalt jungle. The poison of asps is under her lips, and with her tongue she uses deceit. She has bitten and poisoned many people. Be careful, Amos!”

Amos is naive. He doesn’t know his way around in Bethel. But listen to his credentials.

Then the LORD took me as I followed the flock, and the LORD said to me, “Go, prophesy to My people Israel.” (Amos 7:15)

Amos is saying, “I never claimed to be a preacher. I was not taught in the schools of the prophets. As for homiletics—what is it? I have never heard of it. I only know that when I was down in that wilderness of Tekoa, walking with God, one day He called me and gave me a message. His message was like a burning fire in my bones, and He said, ‘Go to Bethel and deliver it.’ That is what I am doing here. You preachers who have come to me, you are not angry, are you? You are not against God’s Word, are you?”

Oh, Amos, how can you be so simple? They do not want the Word of God in Bethel.

My friend, as we read the prophecy of Amos, we see that it is against sin. Amos preached against sin. Years ago I asked Homer Rodeheaver when I was with him at Winona Lake Bible Conference on one occasion, “You were with Billy Sunday for a long time. What was the secret of that man’s ministry?” We were sitting together at a table. He laid down his knife and fork with which he was carving, reached over, and tapped me on the arm. In his very winsome manner, he said, “Billy Sunday preached against sin. The trouble today is that preachers do not preach against sin.” I have not forgotten that. This also was the secret of the ministry of Amos. He preached against sin. He was not a mealy-mouthed preacher. He did not give out messages of saccharine sweetness, artificial light, and ersatz bread. He gave the real article.

Yet to him God was a God of love. But He was not soft and sentimental and shallow. He was a God who punished sin. Amos did not deal with vague generalities. Some time ago I heard this said of a preacher: “He preaches that you must repent, as it were; believe, in a measure; or be lost, to some extent.” Oh, how indefinite some preaching can be! But this man Amos went right to the point.

There were three areas about which he spoke. Out of these three situations in his land, he brought a message. It was a day of prosperity in Israel. During the reign of Jeroboam II, great prosperity had come and the people were living in luxury. In the sixth chapter of Amos’ prophecy he says:

Woe to you who are at ease in Zion.... who lie on beds of ivory, stretch out on your couches, eat lambs from the flock and calves from the midst of the stall.
(Amos 6:1, 4)

As they reclined upon their foam rubber couches, they enjoyed filet mignon one night, and the next night they feasted on lamb chops. Amos continues:

Who sing idly to the sound of stringed instruments, and invent for yourselves musical instruments ... (Amos 6:5)

Their music, like that of America, was taking them farther and farther away from God. Then Amos mentions the third thing:

Who drink wine from bowls ... (Amos 6:6)

They were not satisfied with a little glass of wine—they drank it from *bowls*. It was a day of drunkenness.

The message of Amos is a modern message. These are the things that are destroying America today. Prosperity has brought luxury and greed, our music gives us away, and we are becoming a nation of drunkards. Israel’s sins are America’s sins.

And simply because they were being religious on the surface did not guarantee that God would not judge their sin. Because of their rejection of His law, their deceit and robbery and violence and oppression of the poor, God said,

I hate, I despise your feast days.... Though you offer Me burnt offerings and your grain offerings, I will not accept them.... Take away from Me the noise of your songs.... But let justice run down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream. (Amos 5:21-24)

It was a day of false peace. In the north was hanging Assyria like the sword of Damocles, ready to fall; and in the next half century, Assyria would indeed destroy this little kingdom. Israel was trying to ignore it, and they kept talking about peace; but Amos said,

Behold, the eyes of the Lord GOD are on the sinful kingdom, and I will destroy it from the face of the earth ... (Amos 9:8)

His message was not a popular one. He warned that God intends to punish sin.

However, this man Amos had a long-range view, and I conclude with this verse:

On that day I will raise up the tabernacle of David, which has fallen down, and repair its damages; I will raise up its ruins, and rebuild it as in the days of old. (Amos 9:11)

Amos, looking down into the future, saw that God, by mercy and by grace, was going to yet redeem His people. He saw something that James saw at that great council at Jerusalem centuries later. When James cited an Old Testament prophecy about what was taking place, he did not go to Isaiah, he did not go to David, neither did he go to Moses. He went to the prophecy of Amos where God had said,

After this I will return and will rebuild the tabernacle of David, which has fallen down (Acts 15:16)

But beyond that which Amos saw, James realized that now out of the Gentiles God is calling a people to His name. And just as He dealt with Israel in mercy, He will deal with all people in mercy if they will have it.

God can be merciful because our Lord Jesus Christ, when He came to Zion, was not at ease. He said, "My Father has been working until now, and I have been working" (John 5:17). It was at Zion that He wept over the city of Jerusalem. It was there that He was beaten. It was there that He was led out of the city. It was there that He was crucified. Christ was not at ease in Zion so that through His death God might be merciful and bring rest to you. He was not at ease because God is not willing that any should perish; but they *will* perish if they will not have His mercy. This is the simple message of Amos.

God has not changed. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever. He will punish sin. But He says,

Come now, and let us reason together ... though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be as wool. (Isaiah 1:18)

My friend, don't laugh at the country preacher. He has a message from God. Many of the sophisticates and intellectuals in Amos' day were wrong. They can be wrong in our day as well. God still says, "Come now, and let us reason together...." But don't be deceived. God is not soft. God is not sentimental. God will punish sin—but He will forgive the sinner who turns to Him.