

Against Spiritual Manipulation

Amos 7:1-9

Pastor Tim Nixon

I recently read an interesting article and from it I quote,

We live in a very twisted world as you know, a world where everything is reversed. Dark has substituted for light. Evil has substituted for good. Bitterness has substituted for sweetness, to borrow the words of the prophet Isaiah. It's a twisted world where sins have become rights, iniquities have become virtues. Evil is considered personal freedom. We could talk a lot about the twisting of our morals in this culture. We could talk about the various aspects of morality that have been perverted and inverted, twisted.

In our culture and in our time, there is an exaltation of anger. Anger has become something noble. Anger has become a right. Anger has somehow become a virtue. Anger has become justified, and I mean anger of a severe nature, anger that leads to vengeance and may well lead to violence. It all seems to be justified because somebody was offended, and if any behavior is offensive, then anger has been legitimized. Hatred, a vicious kind of hostility and retaliation are being expressed all the time. And they are expressions of the wretched condition of the human heart, make no mistake. This society may see it as virtuous and see it as some kind of freedom of personal rights, but the truth of the matter is anger is a fallen reaction, a corrupt reaction of the pride of our sinful natures.

And it demonstrates how unlike God we are. People in our culture, in our time lack compassion on those who have offended them. Forgiveness comes hard if it ever comes at all. When people have been offended, they demonstrate little grace, mercy, longsuffering. They're anything but slow to anger, and they are not patient. That is exactly the opposite of God. God is compassionate, forgiving, gracious, merciful, longsuffering, slow to anger, and astonishingly patient. God is the one who is offended by every sin. God is offended by everyone all the time. God is offended in an incalculable way, an inconceivable way. God, who is absolutely holy, is offended by every violation of His Word, law, nature, name.¹

The final 3 chapters of Amos describe Amos's visions of the future of God's sinful people. God's own people have abandoned his Word and his Law. They have, much like we see in this culture, twisted God's authority and sovereignty into a belief that God was small and able to be manipulated to meet their heart affections. But, as always, God's justice will prevail.

¹ John MacArthur, *When God's Patience Runs Out, Part 1*

In vision we will look at tonight God showed Amos events that needed no interpretation. In these visions, God makes his intentions clear and then Amos intervenes on behalf of the people of Israel.

Vision of the locusts (7:1–3)

God's intention (7:1): He is preparing a vast locust plague to destroy Israel's crops.

This is what the Lord God showed me: behold... This is Amos way of making sure we understand that this vision or this word was directly from the Lord. What Amos see involves no hallucination nor was he daydreaming. God was at work revealing an imminent, potentially devastating event.

God was forming the locusts. It speaks directly of a creative activity of God. God is going to create this form of destruction to punish his people, and this is of great concern to Amos.

God pinpoints the time of the locust swarm. The king had his share of the crop, but the people as yet had none; they would have to wait for the threatened second crop. A locust swarm at the end of the rainy season, as the grass used the last available moisture for final growth, would result in tragedy for the farmers and their livestock. The onset of the dry season would allow no more growth until the next rainy season. No grass would be available for grazing or for making hay. God gave Amos a vision of a locust swarm at a critically important time. If the locust plague went on unchecked after the end of the rainy season, the result would be tragic indeed.

Locusts have been feared and revered throughout history. Related to grasshoppers, these insects form enormous swarms that spread across regions, devouring crops and leaving serious agricultural damage in their wake. Plagues of locusts have devastated societies since the Pharaohs led ancient Egypt, and they still wreak havoc today. Locust swarms devastate crops and cause major agricultural damage, which can lead to famine and starvation.

A desert locust swarm can be 460 square miles in size and pack between 40 and 80 million locusts into less than half a square mile. Each locust can eat its weight in plants each day, so a swarm of such size would eat 423 million pounds of plants every day. To put it into context, a swarm the size of Paris can eat the same amount of food in one day as half the population of France.

For Israel, this was a dreadful thing to happen, particularly for people who depended upon agriculture for the majority of their food. This would mean severe shortages of food for everyone.

Amos's attempted manipulation (7:2–3): The prophet prays, and this judgment is set aside. Amos was distressed when he saw this vision. Amos was heartbroken for his people and immediately began to cry out to the Lord.

What was Amos cry? Oh Lord God, please forgive!

Forgive! Amos knew Israel deserved such a judgment. As Amos asks for forgiveness. He is admitting that the people have done wrong. Amos is pleading for God to overlook their sin, Amos is crying out to the Lord for mercy.

But Amos is not repentant as he represents the people. How do I know this? Look at the next two statements:

How can Jacob stand? He is so small.

Amos is not concerned with the righteousness of the people. He is concerned with the results of the judgment.

Why does Amos refer to Israel as Jacob here? One writer commented, “Don’t miss the “Jacob” irony”. Jacob forced Esau, a hunter, into selling him his birthright for a bowl of lentil soup. Years later, at Rebecca’s urging, Jacob pretends to be Esau and tricks Isaac into giving him Esau’s firstborn blessing. Jacob is a supplanter and is known for his manipulation.

This is not at all like Samuel’s response in 1 Samuel 15. God had commanded Saul to attack the Amalekites and utterly destroy them. His words were clear, “Do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.” God commanded Saul and the people not to take any of the spoils but to totally annihilate this entire people including their king. But Saul disobeyed God. Saul defeated the Amalekites but spared the king and spared all the best of the sheep and the oxen and the lambs and all that was good, and Saul would not utterly destroy them. And God’s response? “I regret that I have made Saul King for is turned back from following me and has not performed my commandments.”

And Samuel’s response was to cry out to the Lord all night.

Samuel cried out to the Lord in the midst of Saul’s sin. Parents, when your children are rebellious and disobedient, do you cry out to the Lord all night on their behalf? Those here this morning, when you sin and your conscience convicts you, do you brush it aside, or do you cry out to the Lord all night in genuine repentance?

And God responds with compassion, “It shall not be.” God changed his plan to destroy Israel’s plant life by locusts. **But don’t assume God will not judge them. God did not send locusts, but he did not agree to forgive them.**

Vision of the fire (7:4–6)

God’s intention (7:4): A great fire will soon devour the land.

Amos’s attempted manipulation (7:5–6): Again, the prophet prays, and judgment is averted.

The structure of the second vision is almost identical to the first one. The difference is the method of the coming judgment. While the first judgment would come by locust, here the instrument is fire. This judgment is probably worse than the locusts. The fire would destroy everything, not just the crops.

Unlike with the locusts, Amos does not ask for forgiveness. He just wants the judgment to cease.

And just as in verses one through three, God relents after Amos intercedes.

One commentator writes,

When our loved ones, especially our children are very ill, we immediately pour out our hearts to God, pleading that he will heal and restore them to full health and strength again. This is natural, but do we do the same thing because of the actions of the sinful men and women around us? We are more likely to pray that they will stop being a nuisance.

In answer to Amos prayer, the Lord did relent... God did not relent because of Amos' spiritual manipulation rather, the Lord knew from the beginning what he would do. However, we can only see things from a human point of view. God did not change his mind, but he changed the course of his actions and withheld the fully deserved punishment.²

Vision of the plumb line (7:7–9)

The revelation (7:7): Amos sees God measuring the “spiritual straightness” of Israel with a plumb line.

A plumb line is a tool used by builders and painters to find the true vertical. A plumb bob, typically a pointed lead weight, is suspended from a string and gravity then makes the string hang perfectly straight. Thus, the builder can ensure that the structure he is constructing is erected perfectly true and the painter can use it as a reference line.

Metaphorically, when God draws near with the plumb line, he is looking for those people who are living and abiding in his grace and his law. The Israelites' moral standards had degenerated. They were not upright; they failed the test. When we see the plumb line, we can expect God's judgment.

God had set a clear standard for his people, the law which he had given them all at Sinai. God did not have some arbitrary motive. Because of their false worship and unjust behavior, they were out of line. This has been the repeated message of Amos from the beginning of our series. The people had deviated from the straight and narrow of God's law, and now they're going to suffer judgment.

Yet in the midst of all this God still calls Israel “my people.” This is the first time in the book of Amos that God calls them this, even though he will spare them no longer.

In Isaiah, God tells the people of Judah that after their captivity in Babylon he would gather them in his arms and bring them back to their land. But here God tells the people of Israel they will be spared no longer.

The results (7:8–9): The moral crookedness of the nation demands divine judgment.

Amos has no opportunity to intercede at this point. Amos, no longer the intercessor, is called upon to be a witness. As the covenant standard was placed next to Israel, what did Amos see? The “wall” which was Israel was way out of plumb; in fact, so much so that it needed to come down. God will no longer relent. “I will never again pass by them” means that God would not

² Michael Bentley, *Opening Up Amos*, page 88.

overlook their sins any longer. And, if he will not pass by them, he must pass through them. The plumb line shows that he will pass through "with the sword" in judgment; his patience and forgiveness have finally ended. He would no longer defer the punishment for their sins—the time had come to destroy them. One author writes:

God passes through by destroying "the high places of Isaac," the altars and idols of the false religions responsible for the moral, spiritual, and ethical decline of the people. They worshipped Baal and a host of other foreign deities (Judges 10:6). They set up sacred pillars and idols throughout the land (I Kings 14:23; II Kings 17:10-13). Some of them even burned their sons in the fire to Molech (Ezekiel 16:20-21). Through their spiritual harlotry, they abused grace—the free, unmerited pardon of God—and rejected His law.

"The sanctuaries of Israel," the religious shrines of Bethel, Dan, Gilgal, and Beersheba, would also be among the first to fall. They were the fountainheads of the attitudes of the nation. In them the people were taught to seek the material prosperity that characterized the nation, and in part they sought this physical abundance through cultic fornication and fertility rituals done in the name of the eternal God. Their religions taught the people how to sin and do it religiously.

Next, "the house of Jeroboam" would fall through war. Jeroboam did not trust God. He thought that the religious festivals and sacrifices would entice Israel to return to David's line in Judah (I Kings 12:25-27). To counter that possibility, he set up counterfeit shrines in Bethel and Dan and changed the Feast of Tabernacles from the seventh month to the eighth (I Kings 12:27-33). Jeroboam turned away from the law of God, causing the people to sin.³

Summary

- God is not patient forever. His patience is qualified by an "until" like all good patience should be. God is longsuffering, but only for as long as is proper and right. Then God's patience gives way to wrath and vengeance. God will not be mocked. God will not be spiritually manipulated.
- God is "compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and plentiful in mercy, but he will not always strive with us, nor will he keep his anger forever"(Psalms 103:8-9).
- Patience is not an end in itself. It has a reason. The point of God's patience is to "let patience have its perfect work"(James 1:4). The reason God is patient with sinners is that he gives them opportunity to repent. "God is longsuffering toward us, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance"(2Peter 3:9,15).

That's his goal of grace. God gives people time to repent, but not a license to keep on sinning.

³ John W. Ritenbaugh, *What the Bible says about Plumb Line*, (From Forerunner Commentary)

What about us living in the new covenant. What is our plumbline? How do we measure our lives? How do we measure our church?

The Lord Jesus is not only the builder of the church he also measures the church.

The chief cornerstone for our faith is not the Law, or any other set of rules. Jesus is the chief cornerstone for the believer (Eph 2:20). Jesus is the primary reference point for our lives, from which we line and measure so that we are true and plumb with his Word.

Reflect and Respond:

- What would be God's evaluation if he set a plumbline in the midst of your life?
- Pray that God would, "Put me on trial, LORD, and cross-examine me. Test my motives and my heart." (Psalm 26:2)
- If God judged your life today, what practices, characteristics, or behaviors would he get rid of?
- How do we attempt to manipulate God in ways similar to Amos:
 - Just stop, I don't deserve this...
 - Just forgive, without genuine repentance...
 - How do we avoid, deny, and try to escape the justice of God?