

THE VOICE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

"And the Lord took me as I followed the flock, and the Lord said unto me, Go, prophesy unto my people Israel." Amos 7:15

God often selects and prepares men for His work whom we would not select if the choice was left to us. It is not surprising, therefore, that He chose a man like Amos to be the bearer of His messages to Israel and the adjacent nations. We should know this strange person who emerged from the Judean wilderness to burn the message of God upon the minds of the people of Israel in a day when both society and religion were bankrupt.

I. The Man.

Amos was a product of the desert, born and reared in a world of broken limestone hills bleached by the sun. He resided at a little village or hamlet in Judah named Tekoa, about six miles from Bethlehem. These lonely hills provided the atmosphere for his training. As a shepherd he cared for a small flock of a peculiar breed of sheep, ugly and shortfooted, but valuable because of their very excellent wool. As a herdsman his income was not sufficient, so to eke out a living he also gathered and sold sycomore fruit or figmulberries. And one of the strange things about this fruit was that it did not ripen properly unless tree-dressers made a small slit in the end of it. The sycomore fig was not much in demand. Only shepherds, herdsmen, and the poor ate them. Wilderness life gave to a strong man like Amos just the training which he needed to equip him for the most effective ministry. The solitude, the loneliness, the glory of God in nature, the silent communion with God, the mental concentration, the prolonged meditation on great thoughts, the hardships, the inspiration from great natural scenes, and the contacts with traders and travelers combined with his natural gifts to produce a rare specimen of manhood. Amos had a strong body, an alert mind, and a sensitive spiritual appreciation.

As he pastured his sheep and cultivated his figs out there in the solitude, Amos meditated deeply upon God, and thought much about the sad religious conditions of his people. Day after day he reflected, pondered, and meditated; and when a man gets to thinking, watch out for him for soon he will be up and doing. Take note of the man who thinks; especially about the man who thinks about God, man, and man's relationship to God. Emerson once said, "Beware when God lets loose a thinker."

In Amos God had let loose a great thinker. His head was as clear as the desert air in which he had lived so long. He thought until, like Hamlet, he felt that the times were out of joint. He had an intimate knowledge, not only of Israel, but of the nations beyond her borders. He kept his inner eye on God and his finger on the moral and the political pulse of the nations. Doubtless he had often visited the great central markets of the land to sell his wool, and his lambs for religious sacrifices. He had closely observed the immoral conditions of the throngs in the marketplaces in the cities, and had returned to his work to brood over them.

While thinking upon these things one day, he felt the hand of God upon him, and he heard Him say, "Go, prophesy unto my people Israel." Realizing that the hand of God was upon him Amos could not hold back. He was pulled away from his sheep in the wilderness by a tremendous conviction that God wanted him to preach to the people. It was about 760 B. C., and during the reign of Jeroboam II, that God called Amos from his work in the field and commissioned him to warn the people of the punishment which He was about to send upon them because of their gross wickedness. God called Amos to be both a forth-teller and a foreteller.

He was expected to proclaim God's message to his generation and through the Holy Spirit to make predictions concerning the future.

Amos was a humble and plain man of God who was called from following a herd of sheep to herald His message into the ears of people who would have little respect for a man from the hills. He was blunt, direct, courageous, and dynamic. His righteous heart burned with anger when he saw the injustice and wickedness of the cities. Luxury, extravagance, and immorality were red flags in his face.

Amos was deeply religious. His keen insight into the deep things of God was almost unbelievable. Possessing a wonderful vision and a keen insight into the secrets of international politics, he appeared to be a visionary among people whose heads were too thick to discern profound matters. His unflinching courage and his direct manner of presenting a blistering message mark him as a great crusader. He knew God, was certain of His call, felt the hand of God constantly upon him, and had no fear of any living person.

II. The Mission.

God called Amos to go to Bethel because He wanted the people of the Northern Kingdom to have a strong word of warning.

In response to the call of God for this high mission, Amos went to Bethel, a city in the southern part of the Northern Kingdom to declare the Word of God, to denounce the sins of Israel, and to warn the people to prepare to meet God. God directed him to that spot, which was the seat of the chief national sanctuary where Jeroboam II worshipped, where all the forces were converging to break down the worship of the true God. To Bethel as a shrine the hosts flocked at intervals to bask in the radiance of a religion which had little to say about their sins. The Bethel to which he was sent was a city whose people were guilty of three cardinal sins, namely, inhumanity, intemperance, and immorality. It had reached its culmination of wealth and power with the attendant luxury, pride, self-indulgence, excess, corruption, and idolatry. It was the center of a class of people who were economically and spiritually at ease. Their religious zeal was the greatest ever, but their religion was hollow. Their costly offerings were offensive to God, because they were presented by stained hands and godless hearts.

There, the wealthy and powerful had their winter houses and their summer houses and their palaces of ivory. They sprawled upon silk couches and ate the plump lambs from the flock and the fat calves from the stalls. They drank their ill-gotten wine from huge, beautiful bowls, and anointed themselves with costly perfumes, and forged themselves with rare delicacies, and all of this was done at the impoverishment of the masses. These people were long on profession, but short on practice; loud in creed, but low in conduct; elaborate in ceremony, but lax in ethics. There was no end of attractive forms, no lack of beautiful ritual, but a perfect famine in actual righteousness and ethical living.

III. The Message.

In obedience to God's command, Amos promptly went to Bethel for the purpose of delivering the message of solemn warning which he had received from God. At their great religious festival the prophet took his stand under the very shadow of the sanctuary with a view to speaking to the crowds. This backwoods prophet, clothed in sheepskin and carrying a shepherd's staff, was a hard-looking man. His hands were doubtless scarred from toil, and stained with the biting juices of the figs. His face was lined with toil marks and the effects of long exposure. What a sensation this rude rustic from the hills must have created! Would these fashionable people

be glad to hear him preach about righteousness? Certainly not. They were interested in religion, but not in righteousness--and this Amos knew quite well. They had no desire for a sermon that would cut them to the quick.

This desert-born preacher was not a fool. He knew the ways of God, and he fully understood the vanities of men. Few instances in all literature, if any, surpass the keen psychological approach that Amos made to the assembled crowds at Bethel. This wise preacher from the wilderness was equal to the occasion. His approach would serve as a model for any diplomat today. He began with truths that hearers accept gladly instead of arousing animosity by attacking the sins of his hearers. Amos denounced the cruelties of the surrounding nations. Beginning leisurely on Damascus he quickly got their sympathetic attention because they hated that wicked group, with whom Israel had just closed a war. Thinking how delighted they would be to hear the prophet predict their ruin, quickly he turned his withering broadside on the Philistines, who made slaves of some of the Hebrews and worked them in the mines, and again they were delighted. It is so easy for people to believe what pleases them. Then, in rapid succession, his sharp tongue lashed out upon Tyre, Edom, Ammon, Moab, and Judah, all of which they hated. As he promised judgment upon those whom the feasters at Bethel hated, he captured their attention and their hearts grew warm toward him. What a psychologist Amos was! He knew how people liked to hear others rebuked. People have a queer conviction that when one tears down their neighbour he builds us up. Can't you hear them say, "What a Preacher! If I could hear a sermon like that every sabbath, I would never miss a service."

Then, just as this strange preacher had his audience "eating out of his hand," and he saw that all their defenses were down, he warned that the wrath of an outraged God was certain to smite Bethel. He said that God would throw down their altars, destroy their palaces, and disrupt their kingdom. He was not content until he had dragged all their sins into the light and unsparingly denounced them. Amos actually dared to tell them that, on account of their sins, God was going to rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword. God had given him the courage to tell them the truth about their sins and how He wanted them to live. He absolutely refused to change God's message in order to please the king and the people, or to save himself from persecution.

It was not to be expected that a plain message such as Amos delivered would be received gladly. Shocked beyond endurance by his smiting words, Amaziah, the priest in charge of the idol worship at Bethel, deliberately and falsely accused Amos before Jeroboam II, charging him with conspiracy against the king and insinuating that he was prophesying in his territory for personal gain. Nothing could have been farther from the truth, but this is simply another illustration of how people often try to evade their responsibility to God by blaming His messenger for something. Ungodly people are quick to point out anything in the life of a servant of God which might tend to decrease his effectiveness. But such false charges simply made Amos more courageous and more determined to speak for God. So, Amaziah decided that he would get rid of Amos by ordering him to go back to Judah and to play the part of a prophet there, where they would gladly hear his scathing words against Israel.

His fearlessness of character excites our admiration for Amos. He was determined to perform the task to which God had called him regardless of the consequences. He was perfectly willing to suffer, if necessary, in order to deliver the message which God had imparted to him. So, Amos refused to flee at the command of Amaziah. He also repudiated the charge that he was a professional prophet. He had not been influenced by any personal ambition to become a prophet, but God had called him to take up that tremendous task.

As one reads the prophecy of Amos he is impressed with the fact that it is an authentic picture of internal conditions in Israel in one of its most important eras, and that it is an illustration of the message of a great prophet and the manner in which he worked. He certainly spoke to the needs of his day. He rebuked those sins that he felt were making war against individual and national character. His message was timely and being timely, it was also timeless.

Amos rebuked man's inhumanity to man. He denounced those who had no thought for the needs of others. He disapproved the orgy of dissipation which had accompanied their accumulation of wealth. He pointed out that ease, luxury, and idleness lead to open sin. He harshly rebuked their self-sufficient pride. Thinking that they had grown strong through their own abilities, they were intoxicated on their own achievements. Amos also censured the people for their blindness, in that they had convinced themselves that God was interested in ritual rather than in right living. They were stupid enough to think that they could bribe God by sharing with Him their ill-gotten gains. Amos taught that God amply warns before He sends judgment, but He does not speak endlessly. The repentance for which Amos pleaded, and which God demands, is a repentance that leads to right conduct. If it is genuine, it will lead to right living. He said, "Let justice roll down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream."