“Thus the Lord God showed me, and behold, He was forming a locust-swarm when the spring crop began to sprout. And behold, the spring crop was after the king’s mowing. And it came about, when it had finished eating the vegetation of the land, that I said, ‘Lord God, please pardon! How can Jacob stand, for he is small?’ The Lord changed His mind about this. ‘It shall not be,’ said the Lord” (7:1-3).

You have heard the expression “A picture is worth a thousand words.” Most likely all of us would agree with this. A picture just communicates more effectively than mere words in the majority of cases. Not only so, a picture, most of the time, is more interesting than plain words. It is more interesting to see the truth in a vivid picture than just to hear it.

The list of sins and condemnations in Amos’ preaching can become tedious for the student of his book, but chapter 7 brings a distinct, even refreshing, change in the type of material Amos presents. He is allowed to see five visions from God regarding the future of Israel, and he relates those visions. The literary style of the book, therefore, changes from didactic to narrative form, and narrative is more interesting to us than didactic.

Questions arise concerning the order in which these visions are recorded: “When did they occur? Is Amos’ book in chronological order?” Some writers suggest that these visions were part of Amos’ call when he was in Tekoa. The thought is that God allowed him to see the visions that he relates in chapters 7, 8, and 9 as He called him to his prophetic work. That is a distinct possibility, because in chapter 1 Amos says, “The words of Amos, who was among the sheep-herders from Tekoa, which he envisioned in visions concerning Israel.” This may refer to his call. That is also consistent with the fact that in the first two visions in chapter 7, he pleads with God for mercy for Israel. He uses a picturesque and fatherly type of language: “Oh, please, God, . . . how can Jacob survive? He is so small.” It would seem strange for him to be pleading for Israel at this point in his book after rebuking Israel the way he does in chapters 1 through 6.

It is possible, however, that the material Amos presents is in chronological order. Amos’ defense of Israel at this place in the book can be seen as reasonable. When he saw the actual destruction of Israel in these visions, even though he had talked about it, it so struck his heart that he pleaded for Israel’s deliverance.

If the visions represent Amos’ call, why are they placed in such unusual order? After three of these visions are told, a confrontation is reported between Amos and Amaziah. After reporting the confrontation, he relates two more visions. If the events did not happen in the chronological order in which they are presented, then the order in which he has placed them seems awkward. If the five visions were his call, why did he not group them together in chronological order?

This question is interesting, but the truly valuable questions are these: “What is the message of Amos’ book?” and “What is the application of this book for our lives and for our relationship with God?”
spring crop began to sprout. And behold, the spring crop was after the king’s mowing (7:1).

Amos’ first vision is of a locust plague. Locusts are known to devour all vegetation and kill every green thing, but notice the time of the coming of the locusts. The king had required an early mowing and had taken his taxes, the firstfruits of the crops. This is the second harvest, if you will. The land has been harvested once, but the king received it. This second harvest provided a living for the people. If the full crop were grown to completion and the locusts came through, that would be devastating; but if the first crop has been harvested for taxes and the profitable crop is starting to grow, and then the locusts come in, that would be doubly bad.

When Amos saw a locust plague coming at a time that made it especially destructive for the people, he began to plead for Israel: “Lord God, please pardon!” (7:2). The RSV has, “Lord God, forgive, I beseech thee!” The idea is to forgive Israel for their sin, at least to the extent that they will not suffer this punishment. “How can Jacob stand, for he is small?” This “fatherly” language depicts the attitude of a parent toward his child. This is not a reference to the physical size of the nation. Israel was larger than Judah. It was as large as most of the nations of that day, with the exception of a few notable ones, Assyria being perhaps the greatest. This is simply a statement of tenderness and appeal. Think of a parent looking at his child and seeing that he is getting the punishment he deserves. Justice hurts, and the heart of the parent says, “Oh, but he’s my child. He’s so small. How can he survive?” This is what Amos is saying. The beauty of it is this: God listens when His servant pleads for his sinful people and says, “I will withdraw their punishment. The locust plague won’t come.”

Perhaps the greatest lesson we learn from these visions is that of God’s mercy. It comes shining through, particularly in the first two visions.

**The Consuming Fire**

Thus the Lord God showed me, and behold, the Lord God was calling to contend with them by fire, and it consumed the great deep and began to consume the farm land (7:4).

Amos describes a second vision, a vision of fire. What is “the great deep” that was consumed by fire? Genesis 12 refers to the ocean as “the great deep.” This is the meaning of that phrase whenever it is used in the Scriptures. In this vision the fire is so great that it consumes this ocean out of which it comes. Then, after licking up the ocean, it begins to consume the land. It will devour everything. God is saying through the vision, “I will punish Israel, and this is how I will do it. This vision represents what I will do.” Again, Amos pleads, “Lord God, please stop. How can Jacob stand, for he is small?” In response to the passionate plea of Amos, God extends His mercy. The Word says, “The Lord changed His mind about this. ‘This too shall not be,’ said the Lord God” (7:6).

**The Plumb Line**

Thus He showed me, and behold, the Lord was standing by a vertical wall, with a plumb line in His hand. And the Lord said to me, “What do you see, Amos?” And I said, “A plumb line.” Then the Lord said, “Behold I am about to put a plumb line in the midst of My people Israel. I will spare them no longer” (7:7, 8).

The third vision that comes to Amos is different in that it does not actually picture destruction. It pictures the injustice of the people. It shows that Israel deserves punishment.

Most of us are familiar with the use of a plumb line. It has a weight at the bottom of a string suspended from the tip of a tripod. If the vertical structure being measured is not absolutely vertical, its flaw becomes obvious in contrast to the string. To use the expression from the figure, it has been proven to be “out of plumb.” As this plumb line figure is applied to people and their relationships with God, it conveys that they are not straight with God or they are leaning away from Him. They are “out of plumb” with God. Before God sets up the plumb, He says, “I will set it, and it will show that they are out of plumb. They deserve every bit of punishment, and I will spare them no longer.”

The phrase “I will spare them no longer” is also found from chapter 2 through the rest of the
book as God talks about Israel. The emphasis of the phrase is that He has spared them to this point. He has shown mercy, in that while they deserved punishment and even annihilation, He has not punished them. He has withheld judgment. Then the end of God’s mercy comes, and He says, “I will spare them no longer.”

**AMOS AND AMAZIAH**

The rest of God’s statement introduces the confrontation between Amos and Amaziah. He says, “The high places of Isaac will be desolated and the sanctuaries of Israel laid waste. Then shall I rise up against the house of Jeroboam with the sword” (7:9). Jeroboam II was the king in Israel at this time. This confrontation arises because Amaziah, the local priest at Bethel, sent word to Jeroboam saying, “Amos has conspired against you in the land down here; furthermore, he said that you will die by the sword and that Israel will certainly go into exile.” Although we are told that Amaziah sent this message which Amos preached to Jeroboam, the Scriptures do not tell us what Jeroboam’s response was. It is possible that when Amaziah returned to Amos and told him to leave the country, go back to his home, and prophesy to Judah, he was speaking for the king himself. The king may have said, “If he has preached that message here, then you tell him to get out of the land.” Evidently, Amos did not have any choice when the local priest, the local authority at Bethel, said, “You go back home.” He finished his message, then immediately had to return home.

Amaziah says to Amos, “Go, you seer; flee away to the land of Judah, and there eat bread and thus do your prophesying!” (7:12). In other words, he is saying, “Don’t prophesy at Bethel, for it is the sanctuary of the king and the royal residence.” He was saying in today’s language, “Don’t come into this church and preach that message of sin and destruction! This is where the king goes to church!” Since that was where the king worshiped, God’s message could not be preached there. That was the attitude of Amaziah.

A play on words is evident in the Hebrew that simply does not translate in the English answer of Amos. He says, “You’re saying, ‘Go this way,’ and God says, ‘Go that way.’” We see direct opposites in the commands. A play on words shows a direct contradiction in the king’s command and God’s.

Another aspect of this confrontation is seen in verse 14. Amos says, “I am not a prophet, nor am I the son of a prophet.” He is not denying that he was speaking by the Spirit of God. In 2 Peter 1:19-21, Peter said that when a prophet was given a vision, he was not allowed to put his own interpretation on that vision. “But men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.” Amos is prophesying, but he is saying prophesying was not his vocation in life. He cared for sheep, and he went about piercing little sycamore figs so that they could ripen properly. With these two jobs he had made his living, but he said God called him away from his two jobs. He is saying, “I’m out of my field. God called me and told me to come and preach this message.” When he says, “I’m not the son of a prophet,” he is not referring to his physical father. He is not saying, “My father was not a prophet.” The sons of the prophets were “student” prophets. Schools of the prophets are often mentioned in the Old Testament. They were first established by Samuel. The locations of at least five schools are named in the Scriptures: Ramah, Gibeah, Bethel, Jericho, and Gilgal. When David was running from Saul, he came to a prophet school in Ramah and stayed for a while in Naioth, which we could call their dormitory (1 Samuel 19). We see another school of prophecy in Jericho, where students argued with Elisha about searching for the body of Elijah (2 Kings 2).

Amos is saying, “I’m not a prophet by vocation. I have never been to a prophet school. God called me. He has ordered me to preach this message here, and you have ordered me to go home. Because you have interfered with God’s Word, let me tell you what will happen to you.” He then turned God’s wrath directly on Amaziah, as he said, “Your wife will become a harlot in the city, your sons and your daughters will fall by the sword, your land will be parceled up by a measuring line, and you yourself will die upon unclean [or pagan] soil. Moreover, Israel will certainly go from its land into exile” (7:17).

**THE RIPE SUMMER FRUIT**

Thus the Lord God showed me, and behold,
there was a basket of summer fruit (8:1).

After describing this confrontation, Amos relates another vision, that of ripe fruit. The NIV probably handles this passage best, in that it makes an effort to translate another word play. Anyone who has ever worked with translation understands that word plays do not translate very easily. For instance, an English joke translated into Spanish loses its meaning in most cases. That is because it depends on a play on the words. The effort of the NIV is feeble, but it helps. It says, “I see a basket of ripe fruit.” Then God tells the significance of the vision. He says, “The time is ripe for Israel.” The point is this: “I have let their sin go as long as I can. Israel is ripe now; it is time to punish them. I will spare them no longer.”

Then he says, “‘The songs of the palace will turn to wailing in that day,’ declares the Lord God” (8:3). The NASB continues, “Many will be the corpses; in every place, they will cast them forth in silence.” This is a difficult sentence to translate. The NIV says, “There will be many corpses flung here and there. ‘Silence!’” “Silence” is in quotation marks, with an exclamation point after it in the translation. That is an interpretation, but I believe it to be a correct interpretation. Amos has already seen two pictures of destruction. He saw the locusts, and he cried, “O Lord, please do not allow this plague. Jacob is so small. How can he survive?” God agreed, “I will not do it.” Then He showed Amos the fire. Amos pleaded, “O Lord, stop! Israel is so small. How can he survive?” God responded by withholding the fire. Now God shows Amos a basket of ripe fruit, and He says, “It’s time.” He anticipates Amos’ saying, “O Lord, please stop!” Perhaps, just as the prophet was beginning to speak, God said, “Silence! Make no more pleas. No more opportunities will be given. The time for judgment has come.”

Then Amos adds, “Hear this, you who trample the needy, to do away with the humble of the land” (8:4). Once again, he reiterates their sins and describes their wickedness. Some of his description is familiar. We have seen it mentioned all the way from chapter 2 forward. He tells of how they have sold the needy for a pair of sandals (8:6). He also brings up new charges against them. In verse 5, he says they are in a hurry for the new moon festival to be over. They cannot wait for the worship service to end, for they have other things to do. They cannot wait for the Sabbath to end so they can open up their markets. They hurry, therefore, through all the religious formalities.

He accuses them of making bushels smaller and the shekel weight bigger to cheat with dishonest scales. They were stealing while they were buying from people. God says, “My anger is going to rise up. It will rise up like the Nile River does” (8:8). During that time of the year, the Nile would swell and overflow the land. Man can do nothing except get out of the way when any river starts to rise and overflow its banks. The Nile is particularly famous for rising up, overflowing the land, and cleaning it. God said, “My anger is like the Nile. It is rising up, and it will clean the land before it goes back down.”

Verse 9 contains apocalyptic language. Frequently, apocalyptic language is found in the Scriptures when a passage of destruction is given. Amos describes God’s destruction in terms of the sun going down at noon and the earth going dark in broad daylight. He is not literally going to reach down and spin the earth faster so that the sun goes down at noon. This is a figurative way of saying that the smoke and dust of battle will be so great that it will be like nighttime. Similar apocalyptic destruction literature is found in Matthew 24 and in other places in the Bible.

God further says, “Behold, days are coming, . . .
. when I will send a famine on the land, not a famine for bread or a thirst for water, but rather for hearing the words of the Lord.” Then He describes what the people will do and what they will feel. He says, “And people will stagger from sea to sea, and from the north even to the east” (8:12). I suppose that they will be saying, “Does anyone have a word from God?” Do you see the setting of this? Amaziah has said, “Take your word of God, and go back home.” Amos says, “I’m going. You say I have to go, but listen first. The time is coming when you will wish I were here. When all of this destruction begins to come and your world collapses, then you will say, ‘Is there anyone around who can speak for God?’ If they hear of a prophet somewhere near, they will go search for him. They will say, ‘What does God want for us? What does tomorrow hold?’” Amos says, “You won’t find a word from God. If you reject His word now, in that day when you are wanting His help, His presence, His word, and His guidance, you won’t find it.”

He says all the beautiful young maidens and all the strong men will faint along the wayside as they are staggering from place to place in a thirst for a word from God. Amos says, “You people need to hear this, you who go to Dan to that false god that Jeroboam set up. Those of you who make that pilgrimage down to Beersheba, you need to hear this. You will miss the word of God when it is no longer available.”

**God at the Altar**

I saw the Lord standing beside the altar, and He said, “Smite the capitals so that the thresholds will shake, and break them on the heads of them all! Then I will slay the rest of them with the sword. They will not have a fugitive who will flee, or a refugee who will escape” (9:1).

The last vision Amos receives is of God at the altar. One of the questions that we ask about this vision that no one can answer is this: “What altar is this?” Some have tried to picture Jerusalem being brought into the vision here. They would say, “Not only was God speaking to the Northern Kingdom; He eventually spoke about the destruction that would come upon the Southern Kingdom.” That is a possibility, but another altar should be considered. That is the false altar that Jeroboam set up in Bethel, where Amos was prophesying. Picture God, then, in the vision, standing beside that altar and giving His forces orders to go and slay those who have been worshiping at that altar. This view would also be a distinct possibility. The point of the vision is that total destruction is commanded.

It was probably a surprise to their ears, and perhaps it is to ours, as Amos says, “‘Are you not as the sons of Ethiopia to Me, O sons of Israel?’ declares the Lord” (9:7). Imagine their saying in response, “What?! You mean we, as your chosen people, are just like the sons of Ethiopia to You?!” He would remind them (and us, I think) that all people are His. He cares about everyone. Israel was chosen, but they were chosen for a purpose. That choosing of Israel does not mean that He simply abandoned the rest of the people of the world.

The next two phrases also could be a surprise to us. “Have I not brought up Israel from the land of Egypt?” (9:7). Yes, we remember Israel’s deliverance through the Red Sea. “And the Philistines from Caphtor and the Armeans from Kir?” We might ask, “What’s that, Lord? Do You mean that You provided deliverance for those people also? You were involved in those battles?” Indeed He was. Remember that Romans 13 says, “There is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God.” He has His hand in the affairs of men.

Amos’ vision pictures destruction. It is a sad and a heavy passage, but the Book of Amos closes on a positive note. Throughout the book we have had very few hints of anything positive. Over and over He has described the ugliness of their sin. Over and over He has denounced their wickedness. At the same time, Amos’ book has been a plea for repentance. There is the possibility of something positive if the people will repent.

**Applications for Us**

What do we need to learn from chapters 7, 8, and 9? What lessons can we apply to the way that we live? As we go back to work, to our routines, to school, what part of this will affect us or make any difference?

First, we need to remember that He is God. The group called “Acappella” sings a song that says, “We obey You—because of who You are.” We need that lesson. Once we understand who He is, then we
will not be careless about obeying Him. He is the Lord and whatever He says, we need to gladly and totally obey Him.

The second, very practical lesson is that real religion reaches down into day-to-day living. That is largely what the Book of Amos teaches. People in that day thought that as long as their songs were all right at the place of meeting, then everything was fine regardless of how they lived each day. They could trample on the needy and sell them for a pair of sandals, use false scales, and they seemed to think that it was all right because they made a large contribution or attended a feast. A similar theory exists in the world today. It is the post-modern philosophy that faces us; it says that a man can do one thing at the church building, live by one code there, and live by a totally different code at his place of business, as he cheats people. While those are conflicting codes, some are comfortable with that contradiction. James 1:27 says, “This is pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father, to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.” Unless our religion affects our relationships, it is vain religion. Religion is more than rules and regulations; it is a relationship with God.

I would name one more lesson. We see, even in the midst of these difficult, scary visions, that our God is merciful. He decided to take away the locust-swarm and the fire because of His mercy and for no other reason. When Amos pleaded with God, one thing, and one thing only, made Him say, “This won’t happen.” It is the same thing that caused Him not to destroy Israel when Moses made that famous plea, “Now, if Thou wilt, forgive their sin—and if not, please blot me also, then I pray, out from Thy book which Thou hast written!” (Exodus 32:32). In mercy He turned from the destruction that He intended for them at that time. The truth is that God is love. Even when Israel had sinned and sinned, had they repented, they could have known His rich blessings, His favor, and His mercy.

CONCLUSION

Have you obeyed Him? Have you started up the road to heaven? Have you been baptized for the remission of your sins? Is your religion a life-altering religion? Does it really make any difference in your life? If your answer to any of those questions is “No,” let me plead with you to come to find His mercy. I assure you, His mercy is extended to you, readily available, for God is love. You have no place to go, but to God.

EXEGETICAL NOTES

7:1-3—There is no indication as to when Amos saw these visions. Some think that it was at the time of his call referred to in 7:14, 15. Obviously, he pleaded with God on behalf of Israel when he saw the visions.1 They could have been given later to show Amos clearly what to say.2 I suggest that they could have happened in the very sequence in which we find them in chapters 7 through 9. This would explain why the visions are interrupted by the exchange between Amos and Amaziah. I understand that the plea “Forgive” in 7:2 is Amos’ request that God spare Israel from the locusts by forgiving them. While some believe that the threat is a literal plague of locusts, I believe that God is portraying the destruction by the Assyrians, comparing it to the work of locusts. It is most significant that God heard the plea of Amos. Remember Moses’ plea in Exodus 32.

7:4-6—The second vision of destruction may be even harsher. Again, God relents because of the plea of one of His faithful. In the first two visions, the plea concerns Jacob’s size: “He is small.” This plea is an appeal to tenderness rather than an actual significance being attributed to the size of the Northern Kingdom.

7:7-9—The third vision does not picture destruction, and perhaps that is the reason that Amos enters no plea. The plumb simply shows that Israel is not in line with God. He measures them and finds them to be out of plumb. Verse 9 repeats the issue that Israel is idolatrous and that God will punish them to the extent that the nation will never rise again.

7:10-17—There is a play on words in the commands of verses 12 and 15. Amaziah tells Amos to go home, whereas God had told him to go to Bethel. The two commands are diametrically opposed to each other.3 Verse 14 finds Amos saying that he is not a prophet by profession, and that he has never

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been to a school of the prophets.

8:1-3—The fourth vision concerns a basket of ripe fruit. The Hebrew word is qayis. There is a word play between qayis and qes, which is Hebrew for “end,” meaning destruction. The word “Silence!” at the end of verse 3 is a command from God to Amos not to plead with Him for mercy this time. He “will spare them no longer.”

8:4-6—God returns to the subject of the sins of Israel. This time He speaks of their avarice in new words, as He accuses them of wanting to hurry through festivals and Sabbaths to get on with their money-making. He uses new terms to describe sins in the latter part of verse 5, as He speaks of faulty measures and dishonest scales.

8:7-14—I would pass over this section quickly in order to cover the five visions within a reasonable time frame. Note that these verses promise again that God will send destruction and that the nation will never rise again.

9:1-4—This fifth vision begins with different words. It is different in that it is not a comparison to such destructive forces as locusts or drought. It has no symbol such as a plumb line or ripe fruit. It plainly tells of the plan of God to punish.

9:5, 6—This hymn functions in the same way as did the one in 4:12, 13. The people had forgotten who God is and how great He is.

Jim McDoniel

Plumbline, Plummet

(1) ‘eben, a stone, is rendered “plummet” in the

R.V. of Isaiah 34:11, margin “stones” (for KJV “stones”), indicating that a suspended stone was originally used as a plummet; the preceding clause “he shall stretch over it the line of confusion” (that is, measuring line) points to the R.V. rendering as to the use of a plumbline. In Zechariah 4:10, the word definitely means a plummet; the full expression is, literally, “a stone of tin” (bedhil) or possibly of reparation. The reference is to the rebuilding of the Temple, under Zerubbabel.

(2) ‘anakh, a plumbline is used only in Amos 7:7, 8 where it is used metaphorically of the measurement of judgment in the Lord’s retributive dealings with Israel; the plumbline was represented as used, so to speak, in the construction of a wall as a witness (the Lord standing by the wall) to that which has not conformed to His will and word, and to the righteousness of the punishment to be executed upon the nation for its idolatry initiated by Jeroboam.

(3) mishqoleth is used in 2 Kings 21:13 of the plummet by which the house of Ahab has been tested, revealing his iniquities, and thus testing and revealing the iniquities of Manasseh and Judah, ... A similar word, mishqeleth, is found in Isaiah 28:17, where the Lord says that He “will make judgment the line [that is, of measurement], and righteousness the plummet” (R.V.); that is, His righteousness will test and expose the lies under which the rulers of Jerusalem have hid themselves, in contrast to the “precious corner stone of a sure foundation” (verse 16, applied to Christ in 1 Peter 2:6).

An Expository Dictionary
Of Old Testament Words
W. E. Vine

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