

“Therefore I Will Punish” Amos 3:1-4:3

This passage threatens judgment against Israel. Applying Old Testament threats to the church raises at least three questions:

(1) Isn't judgment typical of the Old Testament, while the New Testament emphasizes grace?

This is wrong on both counts (and is similar to the heresy of Marcionism, rejected by the Early Church around 144AD). The main difference is this: in the Old Testament, God told his people what to do, they consistently failed, and so came under judgment; in the New, God pours out his Spirit, transforming us so that we now obey God, and so avoid judgment. Those who commit similar sins today are liable for similar consequences; though our transformation means we need not commit such sin.

(2) Doesn't Christ's atoning death cover all my sin, past, present, and future, no matter what?

That is a widespread misunderstanding, not supported in Scripture. Christ's death does take away my sin; at the same time, his resurrection transforms not only him, but also me. Flagrant sin therefore raises the question whether I have been transformed, and thus, in turn, whether I am actually saved. The New Testament consistently warns that certain sins are so grievous as to render us liable for judgment. There is still possibility of forgiveness and restoration for the repentant, but we must not take this for granted.

(3) If God punishes sin, is there any hope for us?

We have four hopes: first, the death of Christ for our sin; second, the life of Christ within us, empowering us for holy living; third, Christ's heavenly intercession for us day by day; fourth, only egregious sins bring judgment. (Regarding this last point, much of what we consider sin is the result of an overactive conscience. For a list of egregious sins, see any of the 'sin lists' in the New Testament.)

Day One: Amos 3:1 and 1 Corinthians 10:1-13

Hear this word the Lord has spoken against you, O people of Israel.

Given that this warning is issued in the Old Testament against Israel, how do we know that it still applies in the New Testament era and to the church? The New Testament says so! In 1 Cor 10, Paul cites four sins of Israel, and warns, “Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did” (10:6), and threatens his readers with comparable judgment for comparable sin (cf. 1 Cor 10:11).

Pray for yourself and for our church, that we will focus on listening to God and his standards for our lives, rather than telling him the shopping list of expectations we want him to fill for us.

Day Two: Amos 3:2

“You only have I chosen of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your sins.”

God's love for us is not a license to sin. Just as for Israel – in fact, even more for us – grace heightens the culpability of sin.

Hebrews 10:28-31 warns, “Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot ... and who has insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said ... ‘The Lord will judge his people.’ It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”

Thank God for his grace, and pray for yourself and our congregation, that we will not treat God's extraordinary grace as a license to sin.

Day Three: Amos 3:3-8

Does a lion roar in the thicket when he has no prey?

The lion has roared – who will not fear?

The Sovereign Lord has spoken – who can but prophesy?

Why do we speak of something so unpleasant as divine judgment? Simply because God does. This is the ‘advantage’ of preaching consecutively through large chunks of the Bible: topic, emphasis, and frequency are all predetermined by God.

Pray for yourself and our church, that we can respond rightly to God as he speaks in Scripture, taking deep delight in his sweet words of grace, but also paying serious heed to his warnings.

Day Four: Amos 3:9-10

“They do not know how to do right,” declares the Lord, “who hoard plunder and loot in their fortresses.”

Amos focuses on the sin of exploitation of the poor by the rich. New Testament sin lists include a range of items: for example, sexual immorality, idolatry, adultery, prostitution, homosexual practice, thievery, greed, drunkenness, slander, swindling. But the penalty is the same: exclusion from heaven (1 Cor 6:9-10).

Pray for yourself and this congregation, that we avoid such serious sins. If you are close friends with a professing believer engaged in such sin, speak gently to him/her, and urge repentance. Above all, take heart from Paul’s next words: “That is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God” (1 Cor 6:11). Such sin need not befall us, nor such judgment.

Day Five: Amos 3:11-12

As a shepherd saves from the lion’s mouth only two leg bones or a piece of an ear, so will the Israelites be saved.

Amos was speaking of Israel’s defeat by Assyria, and the mass destruction which followed. Paul speaks similarly of Israel’s rejection of Christ, and God’s reciprocal rejection of all but a small remnant. “At the present time, there is a remnant chosen by grace” (Rom 11:5).

He warns the gentile Christians in Rome, though, not to think

themselves somehow better than the Jews. “They were broken off because of unbelief, and you stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but be afraid. For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either” (11:20-21).

Worship God for his virtue, that he does not play favorites, either for Israel or for the Church. At the same time, ask for his continued engagement in your life, that you, your small group members, and others in this church might not fall away through grievous sin.

Day Six: Amos 3:13-14

“On the day I punish Israel for her sins, I will destroy the altars of Bethel; the horns of the altar will be cut off and fall to the ground.”

The Israelites were devout in worship, and thought that would provide them protection from God’s judgment on sin. The horns of the altar were the raised corners, where: (1) the priests put the blood from the sacrifice to atone for sin; and, (2) people could flee for sanctuary from those who try to kill them (1 Kings 1:50; 2:28). God destroys both altar and horns, rejecting their worship.

This threat foreshadows the warnings against some of the churches of Revelation 2:1-3:22, that sin may prompt God to remove the church as a whole, or punish some of its members. Pray for yourself individually, and for our church collectively, that we will not rely upon formalistic worship to compensate for egregious sin.

Day Seven: Amos 2:15

“I will tear down the winter house along with the summer house; the houses adorned with ivory will be destroyed and the mansions will be demolished.”

Like Amos’ original audience, we use our homes both for financial security and for prestige. Let it not be as in ancient Israel, though, that we exploit the poor and use the money to build bigger homes. Or that we look to our homes – rather than to the grace of God – for security. Instead, let us aim to live in modest homes, modestly furnished, and donate the extra funds for care of the poor, especially at a time when so many are suffering from home foreclosure.