

The Mercy & Judgment of God

Amos 7:1-8:3

This passage brings to the fore God's mercy, his judgment, and our role as intercessors.

Day One: Amos 7:1-3 Devouring Locusts

This is what the Sovereign LORD showed me: He was preparing swarms of locusts after the king's share had been harvested and just as the second crop was coming up. When they had stripped the land clean, I cried out, "Sovereign LORD, forgive! How can Jacob survive? He is so small!" So the LORD relented. "This will not happen," the LORD said.

Locusts were a periodic terror in ancient Palestine. Up to 6" long, the largest swarms could cover hundreds of square miles and consist of billions of the insects. Enormous clouds of the gigantic grasshoppers would darken the sky, sweeping in to lay vast numbers of eggs in the field. Once hatched, the nymphs crawled across the ground, up to 400-600 feet per day, devouring all vegetation.

In this vision, after the first crop of the season was harvested in early spring, and given as tribute to the king, the locusts were to sweep in and destroy the second crop, on which the farmers depend for sustenance. Likely this vision intends biting political commentary: whatever the king did not strip from them, the greedy vermin would.

Amos pleads on Israel's behalf, much as Moses did in the wilderness (Exodus 32:31-32; Numbers 14:10-35), and as Jesus did from the cross (Luke 23:34). God accepts Amos' plea. So he invites us to plead on behalf of those whom we know who are headed for divine judgment, either because they refuse to worship God or because they have turned from God to embrace sin. Whom do you know that needs such intercession? Pray for them. Perhaps God will also accept your plea, not by letting sin go unpunished, but by giving the person another opportunity for repentance.

Day Two: Amos 7:4-6 Consuming Fire

This is what the Sovereign LORD showed me: The Sovereign LORD was calling for judgment by fire; it dried up the great deep and devoured the land. Then I cried out, "Sovereign LORD, I beg you, stop! How can Jacob survive? He is so small!" So the LORD relented. "This will not happen either," the Sovereign LORD said.

In early February 2009, over 200 people died in wildfires in Australia. Raging forest fires jump roads and rivers, race from one tree-top to the next without touching ground, and shift without warning, trapping people in hellish blaze.

In this second vision, Amos sees a fire so fierce and hot that it evaporates the ocean and devours the dry land. Again he pleads, and again God grants his request. Think back on the circumstances which God aligned to lead to your own conversion, the number of opportunities he gave you to come to faith. Or on any lethal sins that you ever committed, and still he has not turned his back on you. Think back on people whom you prayed for, and who subsequently came to faith and repentance. Worship God for his mercy, both in forgiving you, and in heeding your appeals on behalf of others.

Day Three: Amos 7:7-9 A Plumb Line

This is what he showed me: The Lord was standing by a wall that had been built true to plumb, with a plumb line in his hand. And the LORD asked me, "What do you see, Amos?" "A plumb line," I replied. Then the Lord said, "Look, I am setting a plumb line among my people Israel; I will spare them no longer."

By this time, God's mercy to Israel has extended for almost a millennium. His patience is astounding, but it is not boundless. For the entire first six chapters, Amos has been calling Israel back to God. Now the window of opportunity for repentance closes. The die is cast; judgment is coming, and it will be severe beyond survival. Renew your prayer for those you know who do not know God, or have turned from him to sin, that they might repent before God closes their window of opportunity.

Day Four: Amos 7:12-13 God and King

Then Amaziah said to Amos, "Get out, you seer! Go back to the land of Judah. Earn your bread there and do your prophesying there. Don't prophesy anymore at Bethel, because this is the king's sanctuary and the temple of the kingdom."

Amaziah, high priest of the shrine at Bethel, claimed also to be a voice from God. Because Bethel was the king's sanctuary and the national cathedral, Amaziah defended it, and cast aspersions on Amos' origins and motives, portraying him as a foreign mercenary preaching for profit.

All rulers – whether ancient king or modern president – use religion for political purposes ('civil religion'). Through three decades of activism, evangelicals in particular have inserted themselves in the American political process. Pray that prominent evangelical leaders – such as Billy Graham, James Dobson, Rick Warren, Jim Wallis, Joel Hunter – will be judicious in the use of their influence. Pray that, unlike Amaziah, they can resist being co-opted by the state for political ends, whether by Democrats or by Republicans.

Day Five: Amos 7:16-17

Now then, hear the word of the LORD. You say, "Do not prophesy against Israel, and stop preaching against the house of Isaac." Therefore this is what the LORD says: "Your wife will become a prostitute in the city, and your sons and daughters will fall by the sword. Your land will be measured and divided up, and you yourself will die in a pagan country. And Israel will certainly go into exile, away from their native land.' "

The contemporary church desperately and urgently needs to pay much closer attention to this passage, and to the entire book of Amos. Amaziah forbade Amos to preach about divine judgment. As a result, God sentenced him to exile; in order to survive, his deserted wife would resort to the humiliation of prostitution; his children would die in battle or by execution; and his land would pass from his family.

No one explicitly forbids the contemporary church preaching about divine judgment, but market forces make it rare or non-existent. Sociologists widely note that American culture has domesticated God, so that he is no longer holy and distant, but is a non-judgmental, unconditional lover. If Amos were preaching today, what would he say to us if we sidestep preaching about divine judgment?

Day Six: Amos 8:1-3 A Vision of the End

This is what the Sovereign LORD showed me: a basket of ripe fruit. "What do you see, Amos?" he asked. "A basket of ripe fruit," I answered. Then the LORD said to me, "The time is ripe for my people Israel; I will spare them no longer. In that day," declares the Sovereign LORD, "the songs in the temple will turn to wailing. Many, many bodies—flung everywhere! Silence!"

This series of visions began with locust invasions, early in the agricultural cycle, around April. Now the last vision occurs at harvest time, the end of the growing season. The fruit is ripe, as is the time for judgment. Songs of worship will turn to funeral dirges. The stubble of harvest will be joined by the gruesome stubble of dead bodies. The field of dreams becomes a cemetery. Amos no longer intercedes. The message no longer warns; now it sentences to judgment. The time for repentance has passed.

Pray again for those you prayed for earlier in the week, that they will come to faith or repent of their sin before they come to such a day.

Day Seven: Revelation 9:1-21

Often we think of judgment as an Old Testament theme, overridden by the love of Christ in the New. But Revelation 9 combines many of the same themes as Amos: locusts, fire, physical torment, the death of 1/3 of mankind, sin, judgment, and a refusal to repent. Pray for yourself and your loved ones, thanking God that he has delivered you from such a fate, and asking his help to keep from the identified sins – murder, occult, sexual immorality, theft, worship of other gods – that you might not fall back under his condemnation. "Never let my heart grow cold; never let me go! Abba, Father!"