

Pastor John Bronson

The title for today is “The Root of Things”. The “things” has to do with the way things were in Israel when God sent Amos to Israel from Judah in order to give God’s word to a disobedient people. Amos 8:1-4 is the entirety of that chapter and we will read it in just a moment. The eighth chapter of Amos begins with another vision. If you remember the seventh chapter had three visions God had set in front of Amos. Now we have another vision. Again it is a vision of judgment. So you can anticipate what this chapter is going to be like: a vision of judgment. It is a vision of summer fruit, fruit that is ready for harvest. Your Bible, if you have a study Bible in particular, may indicate that there is a play on the words in the Hebrew – you can’t see this in the English – is that the Hebrew for “summer fruit” and the Hebrew for “end, the end, end product” is the same, sounds exactly the same. So there is play on this back and forth. This is the fruit of all that has and has not been done. This is the fruit that reveals the true condition of the people who have produced it.

(8:1) *“This is what the Lord God showed me: behold, a basket of fruit. (8:2) And he said, ‘Amos, what do you see?’ And I said, ‘A basket of summer fruit.’ Then the Lord said to me, ‘the end has come upon my people Israel’ I will never again pass by them. (8:3) The songs of the temple shall become wailings in that day,’ declares the Lord God. ‘So many dead bodies!’ ‘They are thrown everywhere!’ ‘Silence!’*

(8:4) *“Hear this, you who trample on the needy and bring the poor of the land to an end, (8:5) saying, ‘when will the new moon be over, that we may sell grain? And the Sabbath, that we may offer wheat for sale, that we may make the ephah small and the shekel great and deal deceitfully with false balances, (8:6) that we may buy the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals and sell the chaff of the wheat?’*

(8:7) *The Lord has sworn by the pride of Jacob: ‘Surely I will never forget any of their deeds. (8:8) Shall not the land tremble on this account, and everyone mourn who dwells in it, and all of it rise like the Nile, and be tossed about and sink again, like the Nile of Egypt?’*

(8:9) *‘And on that day,’ declares the Lord God, ‘I will make the sun go down at noon and darken the earth in broad daylight. (8:10) I will turn your feasts into mourning and all your songs into lamentation; I will bring sackcloth on every waist and baldness on every head; I will make it like the mourning for an only son and the end of it like a bitter day.*

(8:11) *‘Behold, the days are coming,’ declares the Lord God, ‘when I will send a famine on the land—not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord. (8:12) They shall wander from sea to sea, and from north to east; they shall run to and fro, to seek the word of the Lord, but they shall not find it.*

(8:13) *In that day the lovely virgins and the young men shall faint for thirst. (8:14) Those who swear by the guilt of Samaria, and say, “As your god lives, O Dan,” and, “As the way of Beersheba lives.’ They shall fall, and never rise again.”*

When Amos records the visions that he had received from God for judgment in chapter 7 you might recall there was a conversation going on, the conversation between God and His prophet. At the end of chapter 7 there was another conversation that went on between God’s prophet Amos and Amaziah the priest at the temple in Bethel. It is essential to remember that the temple at Bethel is apostate, it is a corrupted form of religion; it is a false worship and God’s intention is to bring that to an end. There is now no conversation recorded. There is no dialogue at this point. Amos simply speaks the word of God’s judgment and it falls as a hot wind on the face of those who hear it. The time is over; God says, as He had said earlier, no longer will I “pass over” – you might recall that word is key. It was the Passover that indicated that God was

Pastor John Bronson

liberating Israel from Egypt, liberating Israel from slavery, liberating Israel from idolatry and oppression under the Egyptians. God now says, no more Passover. Instead, pressed down, judgment. This helps us I think to catch the flavor. At this point Amos is saying to the assembled wealthy in Bethel, the familiar worship place in Israel that God’s judgment will be sudden and it will be terrible.

There is significance I think in the order of the judgment. The first thing to be condemned is the apostate temple. What he says is that they shall now be filled with the silence of death and that silence shall be a command. We have heard this before. If you go back to Amos 6:9-10 you will read: *“If ten men remain in a house they shall die. And if one’s relative, the one who anoints him for burial shall take him up to bring the bones out of the house, and shall say to him who is in the innermost part of the house, ‘Is there still anyone with you?’ he shall say, ‘No’; and he shall say, ‘Silence! We must not even mention the name of the Lord.’”* The people gathered in the temple at Bethel had so often and so glibly, lightly taken the name of the Lord on their lips, full of prideful certainty that all was well with them, for we have already been told if you read through the book of Amos that these were people who gave extravagant gifts, they tithed far beyond what was asked of them by the Lord, they gave fulsome thanks to God: “Thank you, God; thank you, God, thank you, God!” But it was these same people who had told the prophets, “Silence!” So now what God says to them is, there will indeed be silence. This silence will be the silence of a failed religion. What is the failure of this religion? This religion has left them entirely unprepared for God’s judgment. They did not want a warning religion. They wanted a religion of gladness and celebration. But if we read the word of God, and if we let our faith be shaped by it, we know that the Word of God teaches, reproves, corrects, and trains in righteousness. The Word of God is designed to bring conviction to the hearts of those who hear it. I wrote down this additional verse from Psalm 139. Psalm 139:5 says, David speaking, *“You hem me in, behind and before, and You lay Your hand upon me.”* That is what the Word of God is designed to do. The Word of God is designed to surround us with the truth of God and to press home upon us our understanding of His holiness and His righteousness, out of which flows His grace, but you do not access His grace until you have walked through the paths of discipline whereby He brings you into conviction for sin and you cry out and ask for cleansing, for forgiveness and renewal. But in Israel they didn’t want all that. In Israel life was good and there was no time for a gloomy religion of rules and expectations.

Jesus of course in the New Testament says the time of judgment will come and it will come as a thief in the night for those who are unprepared. Not only is this judgment sudden, it is also terrible. God says to Israel the songs in the temple will become wailings. Why wailings? [It is] because the temple will be filled with dead bodies. There will not be time nor will there be the will to honor the dead, for all is lost in the general ruin. This is almost inconceivable to us, this degree of ruin, but not if you go abroad. I do not know if you follow the news; sometimes I think it is better not to, it is so depressing. In Central Africa they are facing genocide; the Muslims and the Christians are slaughtering each other and they fear total ruin.

God’s response to our sin: Amos 8:4-6. Is it possible that God’s judgment is disproportionate to our sin? Here is what he says: *“Hear this, you who trample on the needy and bring the poor of the land to an end, saying, ‘When will the new moon be over, that we may sell grain? And the Sabbath, that we may offer wheat for sale, that we may make the ephah small and the shekel great and deal deceitfully with false balances, that we may buy the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals and sell the chaff of the wheat?’”* When I read those words I feel like I want to run and hide in the closet. I don’t want to be the kind of person who does that kind of stuff, because by the grace of God I have a morally sensitized conscience. If that was said of me, if I stood under that condemnation, I would cringe and cry for mercy. That is true of people, is it not? Is it not true that until people have gone a long way down the road of moral corruption such that they no longer have any sensitivity to the issues of right and wrong, of justice

Pastor John Bronson

and fairness, that people feel the need to justify themselves? So what I would like us to do is listen to the indictment that God has Amos speak to Israel with the ears of the elite. More specifically [to listen] with the ears of their self-estimation or their self-perception. It is essential for us to remember that the response of Israel to the preaching of Amos was exactly nothing. They did not fall under conviction. So what I want us to do is what I often ask, and that is to enter imaginatively into this narration and try to understand how you could hear Amos' words and just pass them off as if they were no big deal, nothing to trouble them about? How may they talk Amos away? I think it might go something like this: “Really, who are the poor? I mean Amos is all upset about the poor, but really who are they? They are riff raff, they are people of no little to no account. Most of them are marginal; in fact most of them are lazy and they are ignorant. That is why these people simply cannot compete. They have lost their lands because they are inefficient, ignorant lazy people who do not know how to put one foot in front of the other. You see, they are people who can't keep up, they can't play the game. Now consider again amongst the fast set, amongst those of us who have made it, we are the ones, are we not, who make really significant contributions to the temple. In fact we are the ones who give most generously of alms to take care of the poor. Because we give so much surely there is an understandable eagerness on our part about business, about the need to chase the opportunity and take advantage of it and to realize the greatest return on our investments: surely! We are the ones most generous and the temples are lavish and the priests well paid in no small part because of the aggressive and yes even the sharp practices of those in business. In the game of trade, you know, the buyer has to beware. You have to be sharp and alert. Besides which, is it not really true that losers are always complaining; they always say that things aren't fair. Their concern is exaggerated. A smart man, a careful man knows how to prosper. After all, God has promised prosperity to those who give generously.” Of course they would not say such things outright, but such things would be the convictions of their hearts because they are justifying themselves before God and one another. So in the quiet conversations shared amongst themselves out of earshot, perhaps of the priests – although truly the priests knew well enough who buttered their bread. “Bottom line: you have to be realistic. Is it not true that God's approval is obvious because we keep getting richer and richer?” (Please do not think I made that up.)

Now we want to step out of those ears and eyes and you want to step up and put yourself where Paul says in fact we are: we sit with Jesus on the throne in heaven. You want to move in your heart and your mind from identifying with those who self-justify their behavior to the God in heaven Who judges us, who measures us, who weighs us. He of course weighs us in the balance of the life of Jesus, whom He gave for our sins. How does God respond? See verses 7-10. God has not changed from what He said in 6:8. There He said, *“I hate the pride of Jacob and hate his strongholds, and I will deliver up the city and all that is in it.”* That is what he said then. That abhorrence remain in chapter 8: this is God's response, His response to the root of pride. *“The Lord has sworn by the pride of Jacob...”* It is essential for us to understand that what He is saying here is not “I endorse, I approve of, I am impressed by the pride of Jacob.” What He is saying is, “I will treat Jacob according to what his pride deserves.” That is what He is saying. “I will surely never forget any of their deeds: none!” In the New Testament, we read in Hebrews 12:25-29 what could almost be an expansion on Amos 8:7. *“See that you do not refuse Him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven. At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, ‘Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.’ This phrase, ‘Yet once more,’ indicates the removal of things that are shaken—that is, things that have been made—in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain. Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.”* Israel had let herself be misled by false worship. She had come to worship what could be shaken, and had left behind what could not be. For the proud, God is always seen to be in league with the successful.

Pastor John Bronson

God’s response to pride: Amos 8:7-10, *“I abhor the pride of Jacob and hate his strongholds and I will deliver up the city and all that is in it.”* That abhorrence remains. Nothing is going to be left behind when God’s judgment falls.

Amos 8:9-10 describe not just the undoing of present blessings, but as in 6:7-10 after 6:3-6, here we have the reversal of the conditions so prized by Israel: the day is cut short, the darkness covers the earth, their self-congratulatory feasts become times of mourning, their festal songs become lamentations, their festal garments become sack cloth and they tear out their hair to baldness. The death of an only son (v. 10) meant that there was no future, no hope for that family. The end of that day is bitter.

But this is not the entirety nor is it even the beginning of judgment. Judgment has already begun because the grace of truth has been withdrawn from these people. You read this in chapter 8 verses 11-12. This is what he says: *“Behold, the days are coming,” declares the Lord God, ‘when I will send a famine on the land—not a famine of bread, or a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord. They shall wander from sea to sea, and from north to east; they shall run to and fro, to seek the word of the Lord, but they shall not find it.’*” It is essential for us to understand that Amos is not saying the Word of God is not present in the land. That would not be possible. Even without a printing press there would be copies of the Word of God in many different places. The priests had copies of the law; the Levites were required to teach the law to the people. So we can be quite certain that the manuscripts, the scrolls are present. Furthermore he is not saying there are no longer any prophets to preach the Word of God. Amos was one, and indeed if you go and look in Jeremiah here is a prophet preaching in Judah in the very last days of the kingdom. So he is not saying there is no presence of the Word of God. What is he saying? What he is saying is that the people can no longer hear the Word of God. He is referring to the inability of the people to any longer hear or recognize the Word of God even if the prophet speaks or the scrolls are read. The answer as to how that can be is simple. It is the Spirit of God that opens the hearts to believe and the minds to understand. If the Father restrains the work of the Spirit – that is exactly what Amos says. Verse 11: behold the Lord says, the days are coming when I will send a famine on the land. Who determines that there will be a famine? It is God.

In this case there is no recourse, there is no way out. Things do not change as the world begins to come apart at the seams, as their multiple forms of security – forts and walls and outposts – crumble, their resources prove wholly inadequate, as fear replaces confidence, and prayer replaces boasting and seminars in spirituality and perhaps ancient religion or traditions spring up, great efforts at moral reform are undertaken: but it is too late! *“They shall wander from sea to sea, and from the north to the east; they shall run to and fro, to seek the word of the Lord, but they shall not find it.”* The only change is that now they can hear the silence which formerly their noisy celebrations and glad feasting had covered over. They know that God is not there; in fact nothing is there, no one is listening. Perhaps somewhere in their dulled minds they know they no longer have any access to what God has revealed. They cannot believe what they have so long denied.

What Amos predicts in Israel the writer in Hebrews tells us had already happened in the life of Esau. If we look at Hebrews 12:15-17 this is what he says, *“See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that o’ root of bitterness’ springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled: that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal. For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears.”* Beloved this is exceedingly hard, I would hope that it is exceedingly hard for us to hear. It is antithetical, it is the opposite, it is the complete denial of God’s purpose in the age of grace. In this age God offers His gospel freely to any who will accept it. The invitation is constant and we are charged as with Open Doors to take that invitation to every place on the face of the earth and to repeatedly say, “Will

Pastor John Bronson

you please listen and accept what God is offering to you.” 2 Peter 3:8-10 says it so gloriously, *“The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish but that all should reach repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed.”* Did we hear that? Exposed! He does not say it will be a nuclear holocaust in which everything that ever was will be evaporated. What he says is that every covering by which we hide will be removed, and all will stand fully exposed before Him. At that point there is no opportunity to repent. It is over.

In Amos 8:13-14, the prophet describes those who worship the emptiness of the world: *“In that day the lovely virgins and the young men shall faint for thirst. Those who swear by the Guilt of Samaria, [that was one of the golden calves] and say, ‘As your god lives, O Dan,’ [the other of the calves] and, ‘As the Way of Beersheba [another place of false worship] lives,’ they shall fall, and never rise again.”* So now Amos closes with a stark and sad message. Think about it again. *“In that day the lovely virgins and the young men shall faint for thirst.”* We had a lovely opportunity, those of us who were able to go to the Lundberg’s last night to some lovely young people. Put them in this verse. Put our sons and daughters in that verse. We can be sure that these are not the sons and daughters of the crushed and oppressed poor in Israel. These are the privileged children of the wealthy elite, and it is likely that God is not now having Amos speak in metaphors. Slaves were not kindly treated. Those wealthy children would undoubtedly have ended up in the most horrific of circumstances. The “Guilt of Samaria,” the “god in Dan”, these were the sites where Jeroboam the first king of Israel set up in order to ensure that the Israelites would worship not in Jerusalem, but would continue to worship in Israel so that he could enjoy the strengthening of his kingdom and he strengthening of his position of power as the king of Israel. God does not like it when the state uses religion to supply its foundation. What God says is, “I will not share my glory with another.” I have a question about that on the sheet. People in this congregation, people of my persuasion have a tendency to want to be sure that Christianity supports the United States of America. Beloved we should walk down that road very, very carefully. The United States is not the chosen nation, we are not the chosen people of God, we are not the new Israel, and we have no protection at all from God’s judgment and we should lose sight of that. Never confuse this nation with God’s people. I say that even when I say, “Let us pray, let us pray, let us pray.” America has been singularly blessed by God. The people who founded this nation were almost all Christians, and when they were not Christians they lived with a world view shaped by the Bible. Therefore they understood justice, they understood truth, they understood compassion, and they understood the nature of man. This is a truth: God honors those who honor Him, and those who live according to the truths that God has revealed will find success in their endeavors, whether they are believers or not. This land is saturated with Bibles, beloved. I would suppose if we gave up every Bible other than the one we need we could probably satisfy the needs of Open Doors for the next 100 years. We have churches, radio broadcasts, media outlets that pour the Word of God upon the face of this land like no other place in the world. But there are millions in our country who appear at least incapable of believing what they have so long denied.

If I am going to be honest I believe that somebody in this room is numbered amongst those. It is statistically almost impossible that this many people would be gathered in one place and there not be unbelievers in our midst. Where are we? Be glad that this is still the age of grace. Paul says this, (2 Corinthians 6:1-2) *“Working together with him we appeal to not to receive the grace of God in vain. For He says ‘In a favorable time I listened to you and in day of salvation I have helped you.’ Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.”* Whether you are hearing the words in this room or hearing over the internet or reading them from our website or from the typed text, please do not ignore “now”. There is absolutely no way anybody in this room can tell you when the Lord will return, because Jesus Himself said we are not to know. When the day comes, it will be too late to repent. Now is the day,

Pastor John Bronson

this is the time. This is the grace of God. God is extending to you the invitation to you to be saved, to enter into His favor by placing your faith in Jesus Christ, the One whom God sent to die for your sins. Now is the time. I am going to invite us to pray silently, and if you sense that the time has come for you to stop waiting and act, now is the time. If you make that decision I encourage you to come and speak to me after the service.

Please pray with me: Father in heaven as we turn our hearts to You and ask that You would by Your grace shed abroad in our hearts and minds the light of Your Spirit bringing the truth of Your Word and your great love for us, O Father may we be receptive and resistant, listening to Your voice and letting every other voice fade away. Hear us now O Lord as we pray. Amen

Questions for Understanding and Application:

1. People understandably prefer good news to bad and happy times to sad. How would you strike a balance between worship as celebrating God’s forgiving and renewing grace and worship as calling us to repentance and sorrow for sin? How should we balance God’s call to service and challenging the illusions and idolatries of the day with praise for His majesty and goodness?
2. What are some examples of how people talk themselves out of conviction to help people in need today? How are we tempted to “write people off”?
3. Are we tempted to justify our own advantages in wealth, education, and social standing as was described regarding those in Israel?
4. Why is pride such a dangerous condition for the human heart? How does pride differ from honest self-respect?
5. Where do people turn in our day for happiness, security and personal fulfillment?
6. What does Amos indicate was missing in Israel that resulted in a famine of hearing the words of the Lord?
7. Do you think it is possible God would judge and discipline privileged Americans as He did those in Israel?
8. In light of scripture’s view of the relationship between the authority of the state and religious authority, are you ever unsure of Christian support for the US government and its laws?
9. “God honors those who honor Him and those who think and act according to the truths God has revealed will find success in their endeavors.” Does this seem right? Does it bother you at all?