

DISCIPLING, PART III

AMOS: THE RESPONSIBILITY OF OUR CALLING

I recently had the opportunity to hear a missionary to Kenya speak on the results of his experience. He had returned to this country a little disillusioned from his first period of service, yet he was determined to return and make a better showing the next time. He had gone to Africa with high expectations, anticipating that God would use him in mighty ways resulting in the salvation of many souls and the spiritual growth of others. What he hadn't anticipated was the expectation of the Kenyan population and other well-worn missionaries regarding what a young inexperienced newcomer could accomplish. He had heard for most of his life that the mission field was highly rewarding, physically challenging, and that the native denizens of dark, foreign places would throng to hear the "message," whatever it might be. He hadn't thought about the fact that these folks had been "missionaried" to death, that since the time of David Livingston missionaries have viewed Africa sort of like a Disneyland for Christians. A new missionary in Kenya is kind of like a new recruit in the Marine Corps, and the local population considers themselves the "drill instructors." There is little of the Gospel message that they haven't heard, and yet these new folks always approach them with their Bibles open as if they had never seen one.

So, Kenya is now abundant with Churches, Christian schools, Seminaries, and, yes, many, many missionaries. But despite all the evangelism and growth in the Christian population, there is a tremendous resistance to the message. It is still a country rife with traditional witch doctors, magic, idol and demon worship, the roots of Haitian Voodoo, and a trained-in revulsion to the coming and going of foreigners with white skin and Bibles. Into all of this the new missionary was cast, and he found himself not nearly as well prepared as those he came to minister to. He found his message being thrown back at him with distrust and disrespect: he was young, single, inexperienced, and he would soon go back to the comfort of his own land. Yet despite all the negative bias of his first trip, he is even more determined to raise his support and return again to Africa, this time as a veteran who might in due time earn the respect and regard of the native population he still holds out hope for.

OK, now go back about 2800 years, to the time of the prophet Amos. God had plucked him from his profession as a herdsman and an arborist who pruned sycamore-fig trees, and saddled him with the unpopular task of prophesying against the surrounding nations, including Israel. Picture this like being a construction worker, dusty boots and all, suddenly sent to Washington, D.C to tell the Senate and House of Representatives that God was tired of their delaying tactics and that they were in deep trouble.

Right about now a little history lesson might help with the rest of this account. Since the death of Solomon, David's son, the original kingdom of Israel had been divided into two separate kingdoms, Judah to the south with its capital of Jerusalem, and Israel to the north with its capital of Samaria. The Northern Kingdom is referred to at various times in the Bible as Israel, Samaria, or Ehpraim. It contained 11 of the twelve original Hebrew tribes, named after the sons of Jacob, while the Southern Kingdom contained only the tribe of Judah. The Northern Kingdom also had two additional tribes, Ehpraim and Manasseh, named after two of the grandsons of Jacob. The value of knowing the history here lies in understanding that Amos was from Tekoa, a village in the Southern Kingdom. His message of prophecy began by addressing the outside world, then secondly his homeland in Judah, and ultimately got around to condemning the life and practices of the inhabitants of the Northern Kingdom, referred to as Israel. Though they were all Israelites in the larger sense, they had distinct differences and

rivalries, and those in the north thoroughly despised the prophets from the south who were sent to condemn their idolatrous and godless behavior. They considered them outsiders who shouldn't be nosing in their business, regardless of who gave them their message.

Amos was pretty harsh in his criticism and condemnation of Israel, as God led him to speak, and he pronounced a severe judgment against it. In traveling he ultimately ended up around Bethel, once a spiritual center for the kingdom, but at the time of Amos more like Las Vegas. (That picture does a pretty good job of describing how far this once holy location had sunk into depravity, although they didn't have any electricity to run their slot machines and volcano fountains.) Word of this finally got to the king, Jeroboam II, through his chief priest, Amaziah, who seemed to take great offense at someone calling them out on their offensive behavior. They did, in fact, do some pretty bad things. In addition to forcibly corrupting all of the prophets and priests, they continued a history of idol worship, cult prostitution, humanitarian abuses, unimaginable sexual perversion, and the active rejection of the God (Yahweh) of their heritage. Because of all of this "bad stuff" God sent word to them through Amos that Jeroboam would die by the sword and that their enemy would lead the entire nation into exile.

After hearing all of this, Amaziah took great offense and decided to confront Amos. So he got in his face and told him to go back to Judah and do his prophesying, to get out of Bethel, the sanctuary and royal retreat of the king. We have to assume that Amaziah put up a pretty good show of force, possibly having some of the royal guard back him up, in order to scare off this little man. And here is where the story gets good: Amos responds to Amaziah saying "*Dude, I'm not a prophet or the son of a prophet. I herd sheep and prune trees. But the Lord took me from my job and told me to prophesy to you people. But because you refused to listen and told me to go away, here is what God just told me to tell you: your wife will end up a prostitute because of your failure, your children will be killed, your land will be sold to someone else, and you will die homeless.*" (Amos 7:14-17, paraphrase, BDHV) Pretty tough judgment for rejecting God, but remember that it had been coming for a long time.

Now lets bring this forward again to our time and get to the discipling part. Amos had been doing what he was brought up and trained to do, yet God called him out to do His work. If you read through the book of Amos you will see that he was not just an ignorant hayseed, though. He obviously paid attention to current events, he read the papers and watched Fox News, in addition to studying other stuff. He didn't just work and party, he knew what was going on in the world around him. As a rule, each of us has a secular profession or job; we are not all professional Christians. **Yet God calls us out, we are chosen and given a purpose and a message.** If you don't think you have a God calling and a responsibility to deliver it, think again. The Disciples of Jesus were gathered together and commissioned to go and make disciples of all nations (Matt. 28:18-20.) We are also told without equivocation that we must respond to the suffering and needs of those around us. In fact, Jesus makes it clear that if we don't keep his command regarding this we won't even get to heaven (Matt. 25: 31-46.) Read this passage, it makes it clear that without action our spoken faith is false.

Perhaps we can compare the circumstance of Amos with what is going on around us in the Christian world today. The Israelites of the Northern Kingdom were originally of the Hebrew faith and practice set down by Moses, but they had discarded the original intent of God (Yahweh) that they separate themselves from the religions and wicked practices of the former inhabitants of Canaan and serve Him exclusively. They had not only adopted the various prohibited cult and idolatrous practices, they added some new ones. (I don't want to fatigue you with difficult words, but the practice of blending various religions is called "syncretism," and

you will see it widespread if you look around.) They had become comfortable and lazy, and considered the requirements of God to be too strict. They wanted to party and have fun, so they converted all of the sacred sites of God to the worship of Baal, Molech, and other idols, reverting to the condemned practices of the worst pagan rituals. In fact, they became so addicted to these perversions that they were even willing to reinstitute the evil of infant sacrifice to Molech. We can not only translate this into the behavior of the world today, we can even see it in the gradual degradation of the practice of our Christian faith. In the same sense that the inhabitants of the Northern Kingdom continued to call themselves Israelites despite their non-Israelite practices, many today continue to call themselves Christians despite their openly non-Christian practices. Many churches have degraded to the point of openly accepting perverted sexual practices and maintain a distinctly loud silence regarding the sacrifice of infants, hiding behind the politically correct themes of diversity and individual rights.

As we are called out by God to speak for Him, it then is not only our responsibility to effectively walk and talk the Gospel of Salvation in the simplicity which Jesus gave it to us, it is also our responsibility to speak up in defense of Godly behavior among those who call themselves Christians. **As Amos was called to speak to the world at large, we also are. And, as he was called to speak to those in his homeland and those literally next door, we also are.** The same consequence will also probably befall us. Unlike the prophecy of Jonah which resulted in the repentance of Nineveh, the prophecy of Amos resulted in his being berated and threatened. There will be many “Amaziah’s” to be encountered, and we will be warned to return to our “place” and leave well enough alone. After all, they are outwardly successful in their practices and need no disruption from an outsider.

Oddly enough, when the Amaziah’s of this age speak out, they are perfectly correct, at least in the legal sense, to assert their “right” to be left well enough alone. The condemnation of Amos, spoken to Amaziah, would also apply, though. Unfortunately, what Amaziah accomplished by standing between Amos and the people was to effectively condemn them. He thought he would protect the people from hearing the harsh words of the prophet, not caring that he was “protecting” them from restoration and salvation. If we look around we can see a lot that compares. Churches that adopt beliefs and practices from all of the religions of the world, syncretism, and church leaders who try to shield their followers from hearing the truth.

After Amaziah’s rejection of Amos, God showed Amos another vision, a basket of summer fruit (Amos 8:1-3), which signified the final end of His people, Israel, *The end has come for My people Israel. I will spare them no longer. (V.2)* This fate came after a long period of patience on the part of God. He waited and longed for them to return to Him, but they spit at Him and His prophets. Today only Judah remains as one of the original 12 tribes. The others have been lost or forgotten in exile and captivity, the ultimate prophecy of a patient God. **We are called, as Amos was.** There is more to being a faithful disciple than just reaching out to the lost of the world. We are also called to reach out to those who are spiritually “next door”, and even in our own house. *This is a tough calling.*

Be blessed, the evidence of your faith is in your walk. Bill Zinn