

In Anger Remember Mercy

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Preacher: Neil McAllister

[0 : 01] Well, things really couldn't get much worse. It's the end of a long, hard journey. We've slogged through eight chapters of doom, gloom and judgment with very little sign of hope.

We've read as Amos first brought messages to the surrounding nations, condemning them for what they are doing. And then we've read six long chapters of accusation and prophecy of coming judgment to Israel herself.

And as Graham says, each week the preacher has been saying, hold on till chapter nine. Things are going to get better. So we're here now.

And I'm afraid to say it goes from bad to worse. As I was looking at this passage, there was a piece of music that came to mind that seemed to fit well.

I did consider playing it to you, but I decided I'd spare your ears. It's by the Polish composer Penderecki. And it's called Threnody for the Victims of Hiroshima.

[1 : 15] If you look it up on YouTube, you'll find it. It's horrific. It's almost ten minutes of absolute wailing anguish.

An expression of complete terror. And I think as we get into this passage, you'll understand why I thought it was appropriate.

If nothing, the previous chapters almost seem tame in comparison. Like all prophecy, it's difficult to tell what time period Amos is speaking about here.

Is it something immediate speaking about the coming exile? Is it messianic about the coming of Jesus and everything that goes around that? Or is it ultimately apocalyptic about final end times?

To be honest, I think the language leaves us in a position where we have to say all of the above.

The whole book has definitely been speaking about current events in Israel at the time.

[2 : 20] But this chapter talks of both destruction and blessing in ways that seem too complete and absolute to just be some event in the middle of history.

And then there is a subtle but definite reference to the coming of the Messiah in the middle of it. Hopefully, that makes everything crystal clear.

So, we've read the passage in total, but I'd like to, as we go through it, read the relevant verses. So, if you can keep your Bibles open in front of you, that would be very useful.

As we move on to verses 1 to 4, where Amos says, I saw the Lord standing by the altar, and he said, Strike the tops of the pillars, so that the thresholds shake.

Bring them down on heads of all the people. Those who are left, I will kill with the sword. Not one will get away. None will escape.

[3 : 26] Though they dig down to the depths of the grave, from there my hand will take them.

Though they climb up to the heavens, from there I will bring them down. Though they hide themselves on the top of Carmel, there I will hunt them down and seize them.

Though they hide from me at the bottom of the sea, there I will command the serpent to bite them.

Though they are driven into exile by their enemies, there I will command the sword to slay them.

I will fix my eyes upon them, for evil and not for good. In fact, let's continue on. The Lord, the Lord Almighty, he who touches the earth, and it melts, and all who live in it mourn.

The whole land rises like the Nile, then sinks like the river of Egypt. He who builds his lofty palace in the heavens, and sets its foundation on the earth, who calls for the waters of the sea, and pours them out over the face of the land.

The Lord is his name. And so in the first verses here, we see the destruction of the temple, commanded from the altar.

[4 : 36] It's unclear here what temple is being spoken of. Is it Solomon's temple in Jerusalem, which will ultimately be destroyed? Or is it one of the centers of corrupt worship in Israel that

Jeroboam had set up?

Chapter 3 suggests it might be the altar of Bethel, where God says, on the day I punish Israel for her sins, I will destroy the altars at Bethel.

But either way, it is complete top-to-bottom destruction. From the capitals to the threshold, this is not just a little reprimand.

This is total, complete demolition. Throughout the book, the repeated complaint has been about their hypocritical worship. They're bringing sacrifices.

They're bringing more sacrifices than they need to. In fact, they're boasting about how many sacrifices they're bringing. But there's no repentance. There's no change.

[5 : 41] They're still oppressing the poor and needy. They think they can do whatever they want and just bring sacrifices to settle the account with God.

I was recently reading a book set in medieval times where one of the characters had got things so nicely organised with the local priest that he would go and get absolution for the sins he was about to commit and then go out and do them.

It sounds completely ridiculous to us. Whether that happened in reality or just in fiction, I don't know.

But do we risk taking God's mercy for granted in the same way?

We think we can just go out and do anything we want because we will be forgiven. We confess our sins with barely any intention to change.

That's not repentance. But God, we see, will not accept any more of it. The temple will be destroyed.

[6 : 54] The sacrifices will end. It almost looks here as if there is no more mercy available. And as we read on, we see it's not just the temple that's being destroyed, but it's all the people with it.

We read Psalm 139 at the beginning and hopefully as we read this passage, you'll have noticed a striking parallel between them. In Psalm 139, we read of God's inescapable presence and largely it's reassuring.

It's comforting. It's the sort of thing that we write on cards to people who are leaving. Yes, it is in a way challenging, but still, it's largely something positive.

But here, it's totally different. It is totally terrifying. Wherever people could go, there God is seeking them out, hunting them down.

Even the grave will not protect them. There's no escape from God. As has been said several times through this series, quoting Lucy from the Narnia books, he is not a tame God.

[8 : 17] And if before he has roared, here he really goes in for the kill. The interesting thing is we see God personally active in judgment.

He's not just allowing things to happen. In fact, we see God here directing it, carrying out the judgment himself. As we read in chapter 3, verse 6, if disaster comes on a city, has not the Lord caused it?

But that doesn't fit with our nice 21st century sensibilities. God is love. Even the man out there in the street knows that if he knows anything about God.

So what is going on? I think largely, it comes down to a complete misunderstanding of who God is. Of his identity. God is called by many titles throughout this book. Titles that emphasize power and authority.

[9 : 29] And there's several passages like this one in verses 5 and 6 that give a description of his majesty and power and then say something is his name.

Almost all of them are basically a combination of four Hebrew words. Very wary of trying to teach anything about a language that I don't know at all.

Particularly when I'm aware that there are people here who do. However, I think I'm on solid ground here. It's essentially four words here. There's Adonai.

There's Lord. A title of status. Of authority. And then there's Elohim. Which basically means God.

It's a title of divinity. Then there's this word Sabaoth which is sometimes translated of hosts or almighty or the God of heaven's armies.

[10 : 31] This is a title of real power. and then there's this strange one that goes under various different names and we're not really sure how to pronounce it.

The Jews consider it too holy to say and they'll replace it with Hashem which means the name. It's generally written in our English Bibles as Lord in capital letters.

we sometimes we pronounce it Yahweh we sometimes pronounce it Jehovah depending whether you're trying to be trendy or traditional. It means something like I am I am who I am the self-existent one something of that nature.

and it's really the name that God reveals himself by. But here we see these four words are put together in all sorts of different combinations and we get different titles that are translated as Lord God Almighty Sovereign Lord The Lord The Lord Almighty Titles that express great power and divine authority.

So this is not some nice tame friendly God This is an awesome great powerful authority and we read in these verses of his power to create and to destroy He only needs to speak and it's created He only needs to touch and the earth melts as he sends volcanoes earthquakes floods and other disasters So we see that this is a God who created the whole universe to which the whole universe owes absolute allegiance and who will do whatever it takes to destroy evil and to restore all things to glorious perfection I think in fact it was quite revealing something that was said by Ava in the children's talk this morning

[12 : 49] Comment about who her favourite superhero was was Spider-Man because he is good at catching bad people Is there something that children innately feel and know the need for a powerful figure who will destroy evil that we in our supposedly sophisticated adult ideas slightly struggle with but if that is who God is we read on about who his people are let's read verse 7 are not you Israelites the same to me as the Cushites declares the Lord did I not bring Israel up from Egypt the Philistines from Kaphtor the Arameans from Kerr and basically here God says provocatively do you think you're special why do you think you're immune to my anger but of course yes

God did have a special place for Israel but what they're not realizing is it was nothing to do with them they had been chosen although they were nothing so that God might show his glory among the nations through them and they're not living up to their calling but they're also not recognizing that God was active in other nations he's talking here about how he's brought other nations from where they originated to their current location he was not just a local tribal deity and is something that we maybe often forget when we're looking at the Bible we sort of read here about Israel and we think that God is only active in Israel but we see that

God is actually directing the affairs of all nations and we occasionally catch glimpses of how other people recognize this we see Melchizedek who we're not really sure where he comes from we see Jethro the priest of Midian who appears to be worshipping the same God as Moses and we see the wise men of the nativity pagan astrologers that appear to know more about the identity of Jesus than anyone in his own country but also Israel must not think that their position gives them immunity in fact as we were reminded in chapter 3 you have I chosen therefore I will punish you it's because they have been chosen that the standard they're held to is higher and

I think there's a real challenge to us here I wonder how many of us could start our testimonies with the cliched line I grew up in a Christian home in fact let's take a quick survey put up your hand if you could start your testimony with the line I grew up in a Christian home I can maybe count about three or four who didn't put up their hands there there's a real challenge for us there to not take our position for granted as I was told by godly men growing up God has no grandchildren and this is particularly relevant for those who have never really got to the point of deciding that this is for them it probably might be particularly relevant for some of the new students among us who are away from home for the first time and having to think is this what I believe or is this just what my parents believed but it's not just for those that are in that position how much of our identity as Christians is essentially cultural and how much of it is about being in Christ how much of it is just an act that seems to convince most people most of the time and how much is real are there any of us who as Ian warned this morning actually the whole thing is just an act we may be convincing everyone pretty well but we're not convincing God but also there's a challenge here to not exclude any to recognise God was at work in Aram in Philistia he's even at work in pagan idolatrous complacent Edinburgh today are we excluding any that we think no this is not for them they would never accept this

[18 : 25] I think that's a challenge we have to consider but then let's read on to verses from verse 8 surely the eyes of the sovereign lord are on the sinful kingdom I will destroy it from the face of the earth yet I will not totally destroy the house of Jacob declares the lord for I will give the command and I will shake the house of Israel among all the nations as grain is shaken in a sieve and not a pebble will reach the ground all the sinners among my people will die by the sword all those who

say disaster will not overtake or meet us and so the end has come the nation of Israel that's the northern kingdom is to be completely destroyed wiped off the face of the earth

God will put up with them no more there will be no more second chances but then there is that little word yet yet I will not totally destroy the house of Jacob yes this nation will be destroyed but out of the ashes a remnant of the people will be preserved we've seen little glimpses of this hope throughout the book in chapter three we read of the two leg bones or a piece of an ear saved from the lion's mouth in chapter five of only ten left not complete destruction there the call to seek me and live perhaps the lord god almighty will have mercy on the remnant of Jacob and in chapter seven twice we read so the lord relented and now even when final destruction has been prophesied there is still that hope

I will not totally destroy in the midst of his anger God the great almighty God we thought about earlier is still holding out grace because we're told that Israel will be shaken among all the nations as grain is shaken in a sieve in hindsight it's probably reasonably easy for us to get part of that of Israel among the nations we see Israel scattered as a diaspora all around the world that since that time they have never really been together in one place yes there was a bit of a return after the exile yes there was a bit of a return in the 20th century but still the majority of the Jews are not a nation they're distributed throughout the nations of the world but then we get this about being sifted like grain

I assume the description of grain being sifted would be fairly familiar to Amos' original audience it would have been a normal part of life unfortunately for us today it's distant and every commentator seems to have a different understanding of how you sift grain the way that the authorised version translates it it talks about even the smallest grain being kept in the sieve so we're thinking here of the chaff and the dirt falling through but not a single grain not even the smallest grain being lost that's nice and simple and true but unfortunately it seems that most people agree that better translation is pebble rather than small grain which people then try and explain about a way of sieving grain that seems to need quite a lot of skill that involves shaking it in a particular way the grain and the pebbles both stay in the sieve but as you shake it the densities separation out everything is still there in that one sieve but they become separated so the more it's shaken the more distinct the groups become as we were being reminded this morning it's often when the church is in crisis that its true colours are seen when its distinctive nature from the world around it is most clear but either way the obvious simple bit is the sieve has been used to separate the grain from everything else but we'll discover later that it's slightly surprising what actually comes out of the sieve but even with all of this going on with all of this destruction with all of this shaking we still see in verse 10 the arrogant confidence of some they still think they're immune they still think that what has been written is written to other people not to them they think they'll be okay except it's specifically them that God says he's after it's them who will die by the sword but even after all that has happened they're unwilling to give up their self deception their self reliance and throw themselves in God's mercy because there still is mercy available if only they looked for it but then let's read on verses 11 to 15 so 11 to the end in that day

I will restore David's fallen tent I will repair its broken places restore its ruins and build it as it used to be so that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations that bear my name declares the Lord who will do these things the days are coming declares the Lord when the reaper will be overtaken by the plowman and the planter by the one treading grapes new wine will drip from the mountains and flow from all the hills I will bring back my exiled people Israel they will rebuild the ruined cities and live in them they will plant vineyards and drink their wine they will make gardens and eat their fruit I will plant Israel in their own land never again to be uprooted from the land I have given them says the Lord your

[26 : 12] God and so now we get into the good news proper what you've been waiting for all this time we started the chapter with the destruction of a stone building but here we read of the restoration of a broken tent it's small it's weak it's humble it's not what the world would consider to be greatness but it will be restored and it will be repaired by God himself but we also see that it's David's tent that is restored Israel had completely rejected the line of David when they broke away but the restoration will come through David the past rebellion will be forgotten there will once more be a single people if they want to return to

God they have to do it under his terms they can't continue with their rebellion and yet come back to God but although this restored people is small and weak we see that it will possess the remnant of

all nations that bear God's name what's been talked about here is this a nation that will conquer its neighbors let's just leave that question hanging for a bit and we'll come back to it later because then we move on and see how the prophecy ends with the description of the coming days the same caveats about timescale apply here but there seems a finality in the description here that suggests this is ultimate final blessing and we see that

God yes has sent famine he's sent drought he's sent destruction to get his people's attention but now he's restored them to a land of plenty in fact the land is described as being so fertile that growth is so fast that the crops are almost ready to be harvested before they've been planted there is wine flowing in plentiful supply there is joy there is celebration this is great blessing but it's not just these plentiful crops that they're blessed with following their exile following their scattering and wandering they're to be once more established and settled permanently the curses that have been pronounced on them before will be reversed in chapter five we read though you have built stone mansions you will not live in them though you have planted lush vineyards you will not drink their wine here instead we read of an exiled people that have returned of ruined cities that are rebuilt and lived in of vineyards that are planted and the wine drunk gardens that are made under fruit eaten and ultimately that Israel will be planted in their land permanently established never again to be uprooted so we've seen clearly in these verses that God is an almighty

God we've seen that he brings terrifying judgment and we've seen he brings glorious hope but where does the division lie between them on what grounds are some destroyed and some restored I hope we'll find an explanation if we go back to verses 11 and 12 that we passed on earlier unfortunately this is one case where we don't have to come up with our own interpretation we don't even have to look to the commentators to see what they say on it instead we can look and see what James said about it in the council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 where they've been reporting to the council about the Gentiles that are being saved and there's this uncertainty about how they should be included into the church it says in verse 12 the whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the miraculous signs and wonders that God had done among the Gentiles through them when they finished James spoke up brothers listen to me Simon has described to us how God at first showed his concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for himself the words of the prophets are in agreement with this as it is written after this I will return and rebuild David's fallen tent its ruins I will rebuild and I will restore it that the remnant of men may seek the Lord and all the Gentiles who bear my name says the Lord who does these things that have been known for ages and so it becomes clear when God shakes Israel among the nations in the sieve it's not just the good grain of Israel that is separated out and preserved for blessing instead [32 : 25] God shakes Israel in the sieve with all the nations and he brings out of it a people for himself from among the Jews and the Gentiles and that's why we all these years later started tonight by reading a psalm of David while we're studying prophecies written to Israel while we're singing about the God of Abraham Isaac and Jacob because we see that David's fallen tent has been restored by none other than the son of David great David's greater son in fact we see no suggestion in this passage that there was a remnant that in any way deserved to be saved the condemnation seems to be pretty much universal we see instead the grace of a

God who will ransom and redeem a people to be called by his name the glorious blessings promised are not just for some obscure nation they're for all who would follow him but I think as we come to the end of this as we look forward with anticipation to these great blessings that are promised we should be careful to note the warning in chapter 5 woe to you who long for the day of the Lord yes it will be a day of great blessing but it will also be a day of great destruction and terror firstly I would say this is a warning to us to make sure of what we are trusting in to save us as an old hymn that we sometimes sing at the communion service says meeting in the Saviour's name breaking bread by his command to the world we thus proclaim on what ground we hope to stand when the Lord shall come with clouds joined by heaven's exulting crowds are we basing our hope on the completed work of Christ or are we somehow still believing that there's something good in us that will save us but if that's a warning for us the second part of the warning is for others around us early in the series John asked us to pray for his brother Ed and we all have those family and friends around us who will say disaster will not overtake or meet us who believe that they have nothing to fear and so it's right for us to long for his coming as another hymn says oh Lord

Jesus how long how long till we sing the glad song Christ returneth and while we would long for that coming day of glorious blessing we would also long that would be many more that would be included among that remnant and if we really believe the words of the prophecy that we've been reading both the joy and the terror are we going to sit back complacently and say I'm okay I've got it sorted or is it going to spur us kick us out of our complacency that we might tell others of the glorious blessing there is in Christ and the terrifying judgment there is outside of him I know for myself I'm not at all good at that I'm sure many of us would say the same but Keith Green put it in one of his songs I really only want just to see you there and so just to finish as next week we go into Advent as we think towards the coming of the Messiah both in the past and ultimately in the future as he comes in both terrifying judgment and to bring glorious hope and restoration to the remnant that bear his name it seems appropriate to finish with the words of one of the great carols that looks to the coming of the rod of Jesse the son of David where it says O come thou rod of Jesse free thine own from Satan's tyranny from depths of hell thy people save and give them victory o'er the grave rejoice rejoice
[37 : 57] Emmanuel shall come to thee O Israel Amen