

THE PERIL OF EASE IN ZION

Amos (selected scriptures)

It has been said for years by gospel preachers of every stripe that the times since the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ is the age of grace. The NT definition of grace is “the absolute free expression of the lovingkindness of God; the unearned and unmerited favor of God”. Someone in recent days has defined grace as being “God’s unmerited favor freely given to those deserving infinite wrath”. And the blaring message of the New Testament from Matthew to Revelation is that God is a God of grace, and that all that we are or ever hope to be is by grace. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 15:10, “But by the grace of God I am what I am...” We draw every breath we breathe by God’s grace. We understand there is a God in Heaven only by His gracious revelation of Himself to us. We are saved from sin by grace alone through faith alone. But we are also secure by grace, that is, we are kept secure for Heaven by grace, and we serve by grace. From start to finish, the Christian life is a life of grace.

But it can also be said that the Old Testament age is an age of grace. Now, the Old Testament is not an age of grace in the same sense as the New Testament. Obedience to the ceremonial laws and the moral laws of God were imperative in order to remain in a right relationship with God. And by the way, the moral laws of God, the 10 commandments, are just as much for the church age as they were for Israel. But despite the requirement to live by the Mosaic Law, grace was still essential and abundant for the Old Testament saints. Old Testament saints were saved by grace through faith just like we are. Genesis 15:6 says that Abraham, “believed in the Lord, and it was accounted to him for righteousness”. The Psalmist says, “Gracious is the Lord, and righteous, yes, our Lord is merciful” (Psalm 116:5). Well, how merciful is God? Psalm 119:64 says that the earth is full of God’s mercy, and Psalm 108:4 says that God’s mercy is great above the heavens. And Jeremiah writes that God’s mercies are new every morning (Lamentations 3:23). And all of this is Old Testament. From the dawn of Creation, God has been a God of grace. And praise be unto God for amazing grace!

But beloved, the blessed fact of God’s amazing grace is the reason that God’s grace is also a dangerous grace. Now, what in the world is dangerous grace? Dangerous grace is presumed upon grace. It is grace taken for granted. It is grace that many men and women assume will be there to cover the unbridled, flagrant sin that they revel in every day. Or for many Christians, it is grace that they assume will cover their casual, culturally accepted, little sins that they tolerate every day. And dangerous grace is alive and well in America in general and in the church of the living God. And dangerous grace is truly dangerous, for many, many times it leads to destruction.

But we must not think that dangerous grace is a 21st century phenomenon. Dangerous grace flourished hundreds of years before Jesus was born in the nation of Israel. And it was dangerous grace that led to Israel's downfall. But their downfall did not come without much prior warning. That was the message of Amos, a warning of God's coming judgment. Amos was God's prophet to Israel in the 8th century BC, but even though he prophesied over 2800 hundred years ago, his warning is as relevant today as ever. So today we are going to look at Amos' warning of judgment, but also the hope that he gave to those who would heed the warning.

Turn in your Bibles, please, to Amos 1:1-2. Amos does not begin his prophesy with any "feel good" greetings or inane chit-chat. He couldn't care less about stepping on toes and offending people. For his very first words is a prediction of bad times ahead. "The word of the Lord roars from Zion, and utters His voice from Jerusalem". And the obvious analogy here is to the roaring of a lion just before it pounces upon his prey. God is about to come upon His people in judgment. When He does there will be a great drought that burns up the pastures to the south of Jerusalem and the fertile mountain sides of Mt. Carmel to the north. But the destruction will be much more than just the ruin of the land. Chapter 5:27 tells us that Israel will be overrun by the Assyrians and taken into captivity. And that's exactly what happened only about 35 years later.

Now, I want to walk you through the steps to what brought Israel from the place of God's protection and blessings to the place of His wrath and judgment. Turn to chapter 2:10-11: "Also it was I who brought you up from the land of Egypt, and led you forty years through the wilderness, to possess the land of the Amorite. I raised up some of your sons as prophets, and some of your young men as Nazirites. 'Is it not so, O you children of Israel?' says the Lord". It was God Himself Who birthed Israel when He broke them free from Egyptian bondage through Moses. It was God Himself Who led them in their wilderness wanderings for 40 years, never forsaking them despite their stubbornness, meeting their every need. And it was God Himself Who defeated all of their enemies and gave them the land of Canaan as their permanent homeland, a land flowing with milk and honey. And then God raised up prophets and Nazirites to lead them in their worship and service of Jehovah. And notice what 3:2 says, "You only have I known of all the families of the earth..." Israel was Jehovah's special treasure, the apple of His eye, uniquely loved and cared for by Him. And if any nation has ever been set up for success in its beginnings, it was Israel.

Now, I want to ask you a question. For what purpose did God bless Israel in such a way? Well, to answer that question let's go back to the Garden of Eden. Did not God bless Adam and Eve with the same blessings as He did Israel? They were placed in a perfect world to enjoy. Every need was met. Their only responsibility was to tend and keep the Garden (Genesis 2:15). And we are also told that God came down and walked and talked with Adam and Eve in the Garden (Genesis 3). But

here's the point. **God made man for fellowship with Himself.** In fact, God **seeks out** fellowship with man. He sought it out with Adam in the Garden. God sought out fellowship with Noah (Genesis 6:8). God knew Moses face to face (Exodus 33:11). God walked and talked with Enoch so closely that one day they just walked right on up to Heaven (Genesis 5:24). God walked so closely with Paul that one day He took him up to Heaven, but He wouldn't let Paul stay (2 Corinthians 12:2). And Jesus said in John 14:23 that if you or I will love Him and keep His words we can have that same intimate walk with Him. We probably won't get a surprise trip to heaven like Paul, but our walk with Christ will be like heaven on earth.

But that was not Israel's case at all. After all the glorious years of faithfulness to Jehovah and prosperity under David and Solomon, things changed very quickly. God's people decided that He alone was not sufficient to make them happy, that they needed additional friends in their life besides Him. And they began to run after the lusts of their own sinful hearts. And one of the things they did was to entice the Nazirites among them to join them in their sin. Look at chapter 2:12: "But you gave the Nazirites wine to drink and commanded the prophets saying, 'Do not prophesy.'" The Nazirites were set apart for service to God, and while under the Nazirite vows they could not drink wine. But the Israelites tempted them to forsake their vow and drink wine with them, and the Nazirites did. And then they all continued to sin with no guilt at all. And when God's prophets spoke out in rebuke they said, "Stop! We do not want to hear you!" And in saying that to the prophets they were also saying, "God, we do not want to hear you".

So at that point what do you suppose happened in Israel's walk with God? Look at Amos 3:3. "Can two walk together, unless they are agreed?" God says, can two people have an intimate friendship and sweet fellowship if one pulls away? Certainly not. That's what destroyed Adam's walk with God in the Garden. Adam sinned and he and God were not in agreement anymore. And you know the rest of the story. And so it was with Israel. They turned away from God, and they were cut off from God's blessings and left themselves ripe for judgment.

Now, I want to take a few minutes for us to examine some of the sins that brought Israel down and hopefully learn from their mistakes.

Turn with me, please, to chapter 6:1 and verses 3-7. There are two glaring sins that Amos reproves Israel about in these verses. And the first is their **indifference**. Amos accuses them of being at ease in Zion and of trusting in Mount Samaria. And here he is speaking of the whole nation. Both the southern tribes and the northern tribes were guilty. No matter what the prophets said about judgment coming they didn't believe that it could possibly come to them. Zion, which is Jerusalem, and Samaria, the capital of Israel, were both well fortified and they felt totally secure from the attack of their enemies. Verse 3 says that they put off the day of doom. Maybe judgment would fall on a future generation, but certainly not on them.

But Israel was not only indifferent to **foreign attacks**, but to **domestic affliction**. Look again at the end of verse 6. Joseph was one of the northern tribes and here it refers to the region of all ten tribes. And Amos declared that Israel had not grieved over its affliction. And the word “affliction” in the Hebrew actually means “ruin”. Israel was in a state of moral and spiritual ruin, but her people did not care.

But right along with their **indifference** we see their **indulgence**. Look back at verse 4, where Amos begins to describe the lifestyle of many of the people. Many people in Israel at that time lived in affluence. Now, there is nothing inherently wrong with being financially blessed. Job was a rich man, and so was Abraham. There are many committed Christians in our day who are wealthy, and they use their wealth for the glory of God. But all of us know the danger of wealth. Paul writes that those who desire to be rich drown themselves in destruction and ruin, and that the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil (1 Timothy 6:9-10). And Israel had fallen prey to the love of riches and had fulfilled Paul’s words to a tee. They had forsaken the love of God; they were overindulging in fleshly comforts and in food and drink. They reveled in sensuous, provocative music. And their souls were rotting away, and they were totally indifferent. They were presuming on dangerous grace to the fullest degree.

But for all of their indifference and indulgence, I want you to see something else that was perhaps the worst sin of all, and that was their **irreverence**. Turn back to chapter 5: 21-24. It really seems amazing, but for all the sinning that Israel had immersed herself in, she was still being faithful to observe the rituals of her faith. Every week without fail the people brought their sacrifices to the temple. Every week they sang the songs of Moses and played their stringed instruments in feigned praises to Jehovah. But they were only fooling themselves. God said to them, “I hate your hypocritical worship. I reject every bit of it. Get it out of my sight. If you want to please Me, then turn from your sin and let justice and righteousness reign in your lives”.

Now, beloved, as we approach the beginning of a new year just two days away, I don’t know of a more relevant message that God could ever speak to His people in America. **Indifference, indulgence, and irreverence** is the M O for many who claim they are born-again Christians. Just a few minutes ago we all sang “We’re marching to Zion”. And the thrust of that song is, “We are on a victorious march to heaven, overrunning the hamlets of hell as we go, snatching the captives of darkness away from the prince of darkness and taking them with us”. But the truth is, most professing Christians are not marching to Zion, they are at ease in Zion, just like Israel. And here are just a few indicators.

First of all and just like Israel; we are looking to government and not God to care for us. Israel was at ease in Zion and in Mount Samaria as they trusted in their nation for physical protection. We are at ease in America, because we just know that

Uncle Sam plus our financial advisors will meet our economic need, and we are indifferent to trusting in God.

Secondly, all of us know that America is in the worst shape morally and spiritually in any of our lifetimes, and perhaps since we were founded 236 years ago. Sin is flaunted and God is blasphemed in the media every day. Souls are perishing every minute and plunging into a hell that is real. But most Christians are totally indifferent to all of this. We read in numerous places in scripture about men of God who wept over the spiritual condition of others. Nehemiah wept over the awful condition of Jerusalem (Nehemiah 1:4). King Josiah tore his clothes in mourning when the book of the law was found and read to him, when he realized how Judah had strayed so far away from it (2 Kings 22:11). Jeremiah wept over the sins of Judah (Jeremiah 9:1). David writes in Psalm 119:136, "Rivers of water run down from my eyes, because men do not keep Your law". But how many among us are really grieved over the godless situations we see around us?

Now, beloved, Christians should be the happiest people on earth. Our sins have been forgiven by God's grace alone. We have the living God living in our hearts, we can do all things through Christ Who give us strength, and we have absolute assurance of a home with Him in Heaven forever. And no one should have as much joy as we do. But at the same time, no one should have more grief for the state of this world than we do. If Jesus wept over the lostness of men, and He did, then so should we. But how about you? When is the last time that you grieved in your spirit over the godlessness in America, or in the coldness and deadness in God's churches? All of this should break our hearts. But most of God's people, just like Israel, are indifferent.

But we are not only an **indifferent** people, we are an **indulgent** people. Let me share with you some interesting statistics. Last year Americans gave 29 billion dollars to God's work through their churches. That's sounds like a lot of money. But that amounts to about \$763 per church member, or about \$14.50 a week, and that's a far cry from a tithe for most, isn't it? But in addition to the 29 billion we gave to the church last year, Americans spent 50 billion on pet care. And we spent 80 billion on gambling.

Now, these figures on pets and gambling reflect all of America, not just church members. But think about your own family finances for a moment. What percentage of your disposable income do you spend on pets, entertainment, vacations, etc., as opposed to the furthering the cause of Jesus Christ? Friends, many believers will be embarrassed and ashamed when they stand before God and give an account of the way we've spent the money that He has entrusted to them. But how we spend our money is simply a reflection of where our heart is. You may want to argue with that. You may say that you just have too many bills to give to give your tithes and offerings to God. But my friends, God never requires more than He gives the ability to give. And when we disobey Him in our giving, it is because we are indulgent.

But what about our worship? Are we also **irreverent** as was Israel? If you wonder about your worship, ask yourself this question. What's your life like the other six days of the week. Is it filled with actions and words that you know are displeasing to God? Do you fill your days with TV and internet and leisure activities, when much of that time could be used for Kingdom advancement? And how much preparation do you give to your time of worship? You prepare for a meeting with the boss. You prepare for a date with your wife or your girlfriend. You prepare much for game day. But how much preparation did you give for coming to church this morning? I'm talking about spiritual preparation, getting your heart ready to have an encounter with God? Beloved, when we whack away all of our religious busyness, and when we remove all of our holy masks, so many of us are like Israel. We are indifferent, indulgent, irreverent people. We are at ease in Zion, presuming on God's grace.

Now, beloved, when you read the entirety of Amos and when you read the history of Israel, you find that they never listened to Amos' call for repentance, and they suffered the terrible judgment of God as a result. And friend, if you are without Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord this morning, judgment is coming! God says in Ezekiel, "The soul that sins, it shall die". God says in Romans, "The wages of sin is death". God says in Hebrews, "How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?" And if you are God's child today and are living in rebellion to the Lordship of Jesus in your life, I say to you, chastisement is coming. Whom the Lord loves He chastens. And no chastening for the moment is joyful, but painful.

But it doesn't have to be that way. You see, the reason that Israel went astray from God and fell into sin was because they bought into the devil's lie that God alone could not meet their needs. Just like Eve, the devil whispered to them, "God is holding you back from true happiness. There's something better out there for you. Follow me and you'll find it." May I say to you, Jesus Christ is enough. The psalmist said, "In Your presence is fullness of joy, and at Your right hand are pleasures forever more". Look what God says to rebellious Israel in chapter 5: 4, 6. "Seek Me and live. Seek the Lord and live". That's what life is all about, friend. Seek Jesus and live. And He cries out to every one of us today, Seek Me and live forever and ever in Heaven. Seek Me and live the abundant life on earth. It is so simple. Jesus is all that you need! Colossians 2:10 says that we are complete in Him. May God give us grace to believe that, come to Jesus today, and live!