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THE ROAR OF THE LION¹

By John Cheeseman

They say it's the last straw that breaks the camel's back. Even if someone has the patience of Job, if you goad him once too often he will repress his anger no longer. Of course, the Bible tells us that we should be slow to anger; but, interestingly, it does not condemn anger altogether. In Ephesians chapter 4 and verse 26, the apostle Paul says: "Be angry, and do not sin."² So, it's alright to be angry sometimes, which may come as a relief to some of us! In fact, for someone to be incapable of anger altogether is not a good thing at all. It means that such a person is a moral jellyfish. There are occasions when we have every right to be angry – when for example, we see sin and injustice in our world. Not to be angry in that context is to be guilty of moral cowardice or moral indifference.

The main lesson of the book of Amos concerns the anger of Almighty God. What is true of human beings who are good and strong is also true of the Lord. Yes, God's patience is enormous, but it is not inexhaustible. God is no moral jellyfish. He has a spine. He can be provoked, once too often. He can sometimes say – "this is the last straw," and the book of Amos is the record of just such an occasion in the history of Israel.

The opening verse of the book tells us that Amos stepped on to the stage of history during the reigns of Uzziah, King of Judah and Jeroboam, king of Israel. This would place him somewhere in the middle of the 8th Century B.C. Archaeologists think they've identified the earthquake mentioned in verse one as having taken place around 760 B.C. We know this was a time of great economic prosperity for Israel. The place oozed with wonderful building projects and luxury imported goods. However, morally and spiritually, the situation was far less healthy. The people were flirting with pagan religion, and moral standards were declining fast – just like England today.

Chapter one verse one also tells us something about Amos himself. He was one of the shepherds of Tekoa, which means that he was not a religious professional. He hadn't been to theological college. He wasn't a priest. We're told in chapter 7 verse 14 that he took care of sycamore trees – not the sort of person you expect to go open-air preaching. Moreover, he came from the southern kingdom of Judah, and yet all of his public ministry was conducted in the northern kingdom. Since relations between North and South were far from friendly at this time, one can imagine that the people of the north would have regarded this prophet from the south with a good deal of suspicion, and maybe even resentment. So, Amos was a bold man, not least when you consider the message that God had called him to preach. This is summarised for us in verse 2 - "The Lord roars from Zion and utters his voice from Jerusalem."

No doubt Amos was familiar with marauding lions and menacing weather that threatened the flocks he managed in Tekoa. Now, God was roaring like a lion, and speaking with the shattering power of a sudden electric storm. Of course, sometimes God gently whispers into our hearts words of love and comfort, but on other occasions his word crashes round our ears like a thunderstorm. One preacher said, "When I was in college I was told that I was called to comfort the afflicted, but I soon discovered that was only one half of my calling. The other half was to afflict the comfortable." I wonder how many of us are comfortable in our Christian lives? Have we perhaps settled down in a comfort zone, where we don't want to be disturbed? Even a home group can be a place where we'd rather share our own ideas than listen to what God has to say in the Bible. The God of all comfort is also the God of divine anger, and we must expect to be rebuked and challenged.

What is it that has brought about this explosion of God's rage? The answer is given in verse three

and the following verses. Amos sets before us a series of 8 prophecies, each introduced by the same refrain – “For three transgressions and for four I will not revoke the punishment.” This probably indicates that the nations of the Middle East have practised one sin too many. They have pushed God too far. He has been lenient too long. This is the final straw. The first six of these prophecies are directed against pagan nations, the last two against Judah and Israel. This indicates a very important truth. God is sovereign over all the nations on earth, whether they acknowledge him or not. Every nation is subject to his scrutiny, and answerable to him for its behaviour. God is no mere local or tribal or national God.

First of all, Amos targets Syria in verses 3 to 5. The last straw here was ruthlessness towards the conquered people of Gilead. “They have threshed Gilead with threshing sledges of iron” (verse 3). This could be taken literally, referring to a barbaric form of torture, or metaphorically, describing cruel exploitation. Either way, says the prophet, God has been pushed too far. God expects even heathen people to be compassionate and to treat people with respect. Those who can’t be generous in victory won’t be victors for very long.

In verses 6 to 9, the Philistines are condemned because of the slave trade. “They carried into exile a whole people to deliver them up to Edom.” God expects us all to recognise basic human rights. People matter to God, and He will not bless those nations which deny common human dignity. This is something that many regimes in our world today need to understand.

The people of Tyre are censured in verses 9 and 10. They too were involved in the slave trade, but there was something else which added to their guilt. Verse 9 tells us that they disregarded a treaty of brotherhood. In other words, they went back on their word. They broke their promises. God expects us to be men and women, whose word can be trusted. As Christians we are called to say what we mean, and to mean what we say. How often do we say one thing, and then do something completely different? How often do we let each other down, making promises which we never fulfil?

And so to the Edomites in verses 11 and 12. Their big sin was evil hatred towards a neighbour. “He pursued his brother with the sword and cast off all pity, and his anger tore perpetually, and he kept his wrath forever.” This is not righteous anger against sin, but the anger of pride, malice and revenge – feeling bitter, bearing grudges, harbouring unpleasant unkind thoughts about others. Many churches are split from top to bottom, because of angry thoughts and insulting words. Let’s determine never to allow such a state of affairs to develop within our churches.

In verses 13 to 15, there is a condemnation of the Ammonites, who are guilty of war-crimes. They ripped open the pregnant women of Gilead, in order to extend their borders. We need to distinguish between war and atrocity. God is no pacifist, but he does expect civilized behaviour even amongst pagan tribesmen. He will not tolerate the brutal abuse of women, and other such barbarities.

This brings us to the sixth oracle, concerning the Moabites in chapter 2, verses 1-3. Their crime was a little more unusual. They were guilty of desecrating the dead. “He burned to lime the bones of the King of Edom.” (verse one). Cremation was widely regarded in Middle Eastern culture as an act of gross disrespect to the dead. Indeed, in the Law of Moses, it was used for criminals. However, it may be that the Moabites actually captured the King of Edom, and then proceeded to burn him alive. Whatever the precise nature of the crime, they behaved in a thoroughly dishonourable fashion, and as far as God was concerned, it was a step too far. He expected even brutal regimes like that of Moab to show respect for the dead; and if they don’t, they are ripe for judgement.

Here then is the first lesson that we learn from the book of Amos. God’s judgements never fail to arrive. Evil men who play with fire can expect to get burnt by God’s flames. Those who live by the sword will perish by the sword. God will march them out into the darkness of eternal punishment.

Wickedness may flourish for a while, but its end is certain. This of course is the final answer to the problem of sin and evil in our world. God is being patient. It's in his nature to give people quite a bit of rope; but he won't be patient forever.

The other thing which is very interesting about this opening passage is that none of these pagan nations had a Bible. Not one of them had been favoured with a special revelation of God's will. However, such ignorance was not regarded as an excuse for bad behaviour. God judged them just the same. At which point, some people object – that's unfair! The Bible says, it isn't. We don't need a Bible to be accountable to our Maker. Everyone of us has a conscience, and that's enough - "The Gentiles who do not have the law show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness." (Romans 2 v14, 15).

This principle has an important bearing on a question, which puzzles many. What about those who have never heard the gospel? Will they be judged by God? Amos chapters one and two, and Romans chapters one and two reply in the affirmative. No one has any excuse. We all have the evidence of God before our eyes in creation, and we all have the law of God written on our hearts and consciences. Next time, we shall examine the final two oracles, which are targeted on Judah and Israel, when the message of judgement comes uncomfortably close to home.

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Endnotes:

- 1) All Bible quotations are from the English Standard Version (E.S.V.).
- 2) This is the first of a series of expositions by John Cheeseman from the book of Amos.