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### “GOD’S OBITUARY NOTICE<sup>1</sup>”

By John Cheeseman

Have you noticed how much the cinema depends on background music to make its point? Take the Western for example. A cowboy strolls into the saloon. He looks much like the others, gathered at the bar. But then, the music changes, becoming louder and more insistent. So immediately you know that he’s the villain. Or maybe you’re watching a thriller. The camera scans the living room – tables, chairs, desks and carpets. Everything looks perfectly innocent. But just listen to the suspense-laden music. This warns us that any moment we’re going to see a murdered corpse, or some other slice of horror!

At first sight, the first part of Amos chapter 5 seems to be rather disjointed. However, on closer inspection, we discover that the prophet is editing short snippets of sermons, and welding them together by a clever choice of background music. For example, there are good reasons to believe that verses 8 and 9 are lines from a hymn. Maybe, we are to imagine Amos suddenly breaking out into song mid-way through his preaching! Notice too that verses 1 to 3 are cast into the form of a lament. This was the kind of music that was played at a Hebrew funeral, and it would certainly have captured the audience’s attention.

Now, against this musical background Amos throws out snatches of 2 sermons – a sermon on the theme of judgement (verses 7, 10-13) and an appeal for repentance (v 4-6 and 14, 15). So, we have here 4 inter-mingling elements; the musical score, consisting of a hymn and a lament, and then the screenplay, which gives us a word of judgement and an offer of mercy. We’ll look at each of these in turn.

First of all, in verses 8 and 9, the hymn proclaims the sovereign power of God. Look at the stars, says the prophet. They seem to be stable and secure, but don’t forget God made them, and if it wasn’t for Him, they wouldn’t exist at all. Likewise, God is the One who controls the mighty oceans, but He only has to utter a word, and everything will change. The world is only stable because of God. Apart from Him, the whole universe would disintegrate into chaos. Moreover, He also controls the rise and fall of nations. Verse 9, “Who makes destruction flash forth against the strong, so that destruction comes upon the fortress.”

Why does Amos include this hymn as the background to his sermon? Because if the world is ultimately controlled by God, then it is foolish for Israel to be complacent about the political and economic situation. Everything may be going well at the moment, but watch out – God could destroy it all in a flash. The American senator Barry Goldwater once said: “A government which is big enough to give you all you want, is also big enough to take it all away.” The same is true of almighty God. How foolish are those men and women who think that they are in control of their destinies. We live in a world that is littered with the wrecks of umpteen civilizations. Let us not imagine that our present civilization is immortal. We are absolutely dependent on the sovereign power of God.

The lament of the first three verses introduces us to the solemn decree of God. “Fallen, no more to rise, is the virgin Israel; forsaken on her land, with none to raise her up.” (verse 2). You will probably know that a newspaper once accidentally published Mark Twain’s obituary, and when he discovered this he was so amused that he sent the famous cable to the editor:- “Reports of my death have been greatly exaggerated.” One can’t help thinking that those who heard this lament of Amos would not have responded quite so light-heartedly. The prophet is writing here an obituary for the

entire nation. But the most disturbing feature of all is that this was all God's doing, as verse 17 later makes plain – “In all vineyards there shall be wailing, for I will pass through your midst’, says the Lord.” It was God who was driving the nails into Israel's coffin. He was writing the epitaph. The God of sovereign power that Israel sang about in her hymns, has issued a solemn decree. The time of stability is over. God is going to settle accounts with Israel, and it will be no laughing matter. On the contrary, it will be a funeral for the nation.

We need to understand that the God of the Bible is not a soft touch. The apostle Paul speaks about “the kindness and the severity of God” (Romans 11 v22). Jesus himself warns us not to be afraid of those who kill the body, but rather of the one who can destroy both body and soul in hell (Matthew 10 v28). Of course, it is fashionable in Christian circles today to play down the harder side of God's personality, and to talk only about His love. However, to do that is to become unbalanced. Of course, the God of the Bible is a God of love, but there is so much more to God's character than that. What is that “so much more”? Amos sums it up in a single word – “righteousness” (v7). This brings us to the third element in this passage, namely the moral concern of God.

The American statesman Thomas Jefferson once wrote this:- “I tremble for my country, when I reflect that God is just.” Now, the justice of God was something that never crossed the minds of these Israelites. Indeed, says Amos, what you call justice is such a revolting perversion of the word that it makes God sick. “You turn justice to wormwood”, literally “poison” (v7). “They hate him who reproves in the gate, and they abhor him who speaks the truth” (v10). “You trample on the poor, and you exact taxes of grain from him” (v11). “You who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and turn aside the needy in the gate” (v12). What a world of topsy-turvy morality! And look at verse 13 – “he who is prudent will keep silent in such a time.” How sad, when evil is so powerful that decent people are afraid to speak up. In some ways, this element of intimidation is present in our country today, where political correctness is the common philosophy. Many, for example, are afraid to speak out against homosexual practice in case there is a knock on the door from the police, with a warning about sexual harassment. “If you know what's good for you, mind your own business, and keep your mouth shut.”

However, as far as God is concerned, such appalling injustice amounts to sin; “I know how many are your transgressions, and how great are your sins” (v12). God is not going to turn a blind eye to these things. He sees everything and He knows everything, and He burns with a moral indignation, because He is a righteous God. Verse 11 tells us that these wicked people will not be allowed to get away with it. “You have built houses of hewn stone, but shall not dwell in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine.” Of course, the wicked don't always get their come-uppance in this world. But the Bible makes it crystal clear that they will most certainly face the wrath of God in the next world, and this of course is the ultimate answer to the problem of human suffering and injustice.

This is not quite the end of the story, because the second sermon in this passage is an appeal to come back to God, before it's too late. Although God will definitely condemn and punish the wicked, He takes no delight in so doing, and He longs for people to turn away from evil and find forgiveness. And so, our fourth strand is the merciful invitation of God. “Seek me and live, but do not seek Bethel, and do not enter into Gilgal or cross over to Beersheba; for Gilgal shall surely go into exile, and Bethel shall come to nothing.” (verses 4b and 5). Bethel and Gilgal were places of institutional religion, and yet the prophet is saying – don't go there! Why ever not? Because although you will find ritual and ceremony, you won't find God. Oh yes – people will be singing hymns and saying prayers, but the reality is these places are doomed.

Sadly, there are churches today, where we'd have to say the same thing. There may be all kinds of religious rituals and paraphernalia going on, but we won't find God there. Why? Because the word

of God is not being faithfully preached. If we want to find God, we won't find Him in the empty rituals of the church, but we will find Him as we seek Him in His word. And of course there has to be repentance. "Seek good and not evil, that you may live, and so that the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you, as you have said. Hate evil, and love good, and establish justice in the gate; it may be that the Lord, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph." (Verses 14 and 15).

Repentance means a deliberate turning away from all that I know to be wrong and a sincere determination to go God's way. If we do that, then "it may be" (v15) that the Lord will have mercy. Does that sound slightly uncertain? The words "may be" are there for a reason. You and I have no right to God's grace and forgiveness. We don't deserve His mercy. If He chooses to grant it, it's His divine prerogative, but we would be foolish to take Him for granted. Having said this, in the whole history of the world, there is no record of any humble and repentant sinner ever seeking God's mercy in vain. Jesus said, "Whoever comes to me, I will never cast out" (John 6 v37b). "Seek me and live," says the Lord, but meanwhile listen to the background music. The funeral march is already playing!

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Endnotes:

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