

<AMOS: BACK TO 'THE START'>

The Bible has a number of things that seem to be mutually inconsistent and, for many of us, it's difficult to get our heads around those irreconcilable differences. One blogger makes the following comment, which reflects how many people think about God:

"One of the greatest seeming contradictions in the Bible is that on the one hand you have a God who is benevolent, merciful, full of love, in fact perfect in love and we learn in I John 4:18 that there is no fear in love, perfect love casts out all fear. Yet, (in Ps 38:1) David (is) terrified over God's anger and wrath.

Look, I am sorry but we cannot have it both ways. Either we have a God who short tempered, ready to whip us into submission. We have a do as I say not as I do type God who flies off the handle when we push him too far with our sins. Or we have a God of total love, merciful, forgiving who lovingly corrects us or redirects us when we veer down the wrong path. When we talk of perfection there is no middle ground."¹

GETTING STARTED: What is your response to the above comment? Do you agree or disagree with it? Do you believe that God is capricious? (i.e. that God is given to sudden and unaccountable changes of mood or behavior and changing according to no discernible rules; unpredictable). Is that what God's wrath is all about?

READ: AMOS 7:1-17

In Amos 7:1-6, the initial intention of God was to decimate the people by destroying their crops and by showering down fire. A lot of Australian farmers currently know what it is to have crops ravaged by plagues and many of us know what it means to live through a firestorm that devours the land and everything on it.

- ? Amos also knew that the land was polluted by idolatry and needed to be cleansed. But the veracity and force of God's anger, that he saw in his visions, startled and frightened him. What picture of God do you get, when you consider that God was willing to bring this devastation to the land? Is it consistent with how you understand the nature of God?

We read that twice, Amos cried out, "Sovereign Lord, forgive! How can Jacob survive? He is so small!" and that because of this, the Lord relented and said "This will not happen." This is not the first time where a person had 'bargained' with God regarding punishment. E.g. In Gen 18:16-33, Abraham asked God to hold off punishment on the city of Sodom if righteous people could be found in that city.

- ? What does this interaction tell us about the relationship that Amos had with God and the way he viewed God? What does this interaction tell us about the character of God?

Amos knew that he was called to speak God's words of judgement to the northern kingdom of Israel.

"Amos boldly calls for God's forgiveness, though usually forgiveness is based on a previous response of repentance (1 Kings 8:30–39, 48–50; 2 Chron. 7:14). When sin is confessed, God no longer holds the sinner accountable, and the punishment is removed. Since there is no sign of any repentance by Israel, Amos is asking for an act of pure grace that was undeserved. He requests God's compassion because some in Israel will not be able to survive; they are just too small and insignificant. ... God's relenting (*niham*) on his plans is an anthropomorphic way of explaining his personal interaction with the prophet and his people. Compassion for the people is not inconsistent with God's character; rather, it reveals the depth of his patience and his openness to hearing the prayers of righteous intercessors (James 5:13–18)."²

- ? Should we expect God forgive us, including withholding or removing judgement, if we do not repent of our sin? Should we expect God to "change his mind", especially about his revealed will in Scripture?
- ? An essential part of the gospel message is that "the wages of sin is death". (Rom 6:23) This is a hard message to communicate to people. People do not want to know that there are consequences for their actions and tend to 'shoot the messenger'. When you are in a situation where there is obvious wrongdoing, what do you do?
 - o Do you remain quiet and hope that you are not required to get involved? OR
 - o Do you speak out and risk the consequences of that?

¹ Chaim & Laura, (27 December 2014) HEBREW WORD STUDY – WRATH – זמח
<https://www.chaimbentorah.com/2014/12/hebrew-word-study-wrath-%D7%97%D7%9E%D7%94/>

² Smith, G. V. (2001). *Hosea, Amos, Micah*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House. p354.

- ? In 2 Chron 7:14, God promises that “if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sins and will heal their land.” The judgement of God had consequences on the ‘land’. What does this verse indicate about the link between our posture before God and the wellbeing of our land?

In Amos 7:7-8, God brings out a ‘plumb line’ which is a building implement.

“Found only here in the Old Testament, the word has sometimes been interpreted as an instrument of judgment, whether a sword made of tin or a bucket of molten lead. The mention of the wall, however, and the hand holding the metal object have pointed most interpreters and virtually all translations to a device used in measurement or construction, therefore, a *plumb-line*.”³

“A plumb line is a standard by which a wall’s vertical trueness is tested. So the Lord is testing the people by a standard. In the first two visions, no standard was given; therefore, the threatened judgment could be withdrawn. But after the vision of the plumb line, the Lord cannot be accused of arbitrariness if he carries out the threats. The people have failed to live up to their privilege as Yahweh’s people. They have been called to be holy (Ex 19:6). But their repressive society has violated the very standards of holiness. They gave lip service to the covenant of Yahweh but ignored the social concerns woven into its fabric. When the test came, they have been found wanting. The plumb line shows that the Lord is not an arbitrary judge.”⁴

Phil noted in his sermon that the wrath of God is not arbitrary, but rather that it is deserved, just and right.

- ? What judgements were proclaimed in Amos 7:8-9, 11, 17? Who and what were they directed at?
- ? In Amos 7:12-13, Amaziah told Amos to get off his turf and go home. What was Amos’ response? What authority did Amos have? What motivated Amos to persevere in this role?
- ? The people of God had the law, which defined their view of right and wrong. In Rom 2:14-15, Paul wrote that “Even Gentiles, who do not have God’s written law, show that they know his law when they instinctively obey it, even without having heard it. They demonstrate that God’s law is written in their hearts, for their own conscience and thoughts either accuse them or tell them they are doing right.” If God has given each of us a conscience, which tells us when we are doing wrong, can we claim that God is unjust in judging us?

One of my theology lecturers used to comment that “the definition of a heresy, is when a both / and, becomes an either / or”. There are some things in Scripture where two things seem to be mutually inconsistent. One of those is that God is both a God of justice and a God of mercy. As Christians, we can tend to major on one aspect of God’s character and fail to highlight the other. We need to hold those two things in balance and in tension.

“God’s justice and mercy are seemingly incompatible. After all, justice involves the dispensing of deserved punishment for wrongdoing, and mercy is all about pardon and compassion for an offender. However, these two attributes of God do in fact form a unity within His character. ...

But the Bible also speaks of God’s justice and His wrath over sin. In fact, God’s perfect justice is a defining characteristic: “There is no God apart from me, a righteous [just] God and a Saviour; there is none but me” (Isaiah 45:21). “He is the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he.” (Deuteronomy 32:4).”⁵

- ? Which attribute of God do you, personally, put most weight on? Do you tend to fear God’s judgement? Or live in gratitude of his mercy? Or maybe, to take God’s mercy for granted?

REFLECT, SHARE & PRAY: In Rom 2:5-8, the apostle Paul wrote that we can either choose to store up God’s wrath on ourselves or we can choose to escape that wrath, by trusting that Jesus has taken the punishment and wrath of God on himself, so that we might have eternal life.

“But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God’s wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed. God “will repay each person according to what they have done.” To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life. But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger.”

- ? Being aware that God’s wrath is real, that it is scary and that it is escapable, is a great motivation for sharing our faith. Who are you praying for, to come to know the awesome grace of God?

³ Hubbard, D. A. (1989). *Joel and Amos: an Introduction and Commentary* (Vol. 25). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press. p222.

⁴ McComiskey, T. E., & Longman, T., III. (2008). *Amos*. In D. E. Garland (Ed.), *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Daniel–Malachi (Revised Edition)* (Vol. 8). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan. p408.

⁵ <https://www.gotquestions.org/mercy-justice.html>