

DEAD FRUITS OR DEAD ROOTS?

Today's Text: Amos Chaps. 1-2

Extracts:

Thus says the Lord: “For three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not turn away its punishment, because they sell the righteous for silver, and the poor for a pair of sandals. They pant after the dust of the earth which is on the head of the poor, and pervert the way of the humble. A man and his father go in to the same girl, to defy My holy name. They lie down by every altar on clothes taken in pledge, and drink the wine of the condemned in the house of their god. Yet it was I who destroyed the Amorite before them, whose height was like the height of the cedars, and he was as strong as the oaks; yet I destroyed his fruit above and his roots beneath” [Amos 2: 6-9]

Every year during the summer, Southern California is very susceptible to ferocious wild fires that devastate vast hectares of vegetation, threaten or destroy thousands of homes and cause loss of animal and human lives. Hot weather and strong winds are usually responsible for the spread of the fires but in most cases, a little spark (such as a cigarette butt carelessly thrown away by smokers in moving vehicles or forest hikers, or a deliberate match struck by an arsonist) is all it takes to begin the conflagration.

Interestingly, when the rains come during the winter months, vegetation grows back, which provides fodder for the fires during the following summer. The plants are able to grow back and perhaps bear fruits because the annual fires only destroy what is above the ground, namely the branches, leaves and fruits. The roots underground are spared. When the rains return, the roots are revived and new shoots grow out. It is to be expected that if any plants were to have both their roots and fruits burnt in one season, they could never grow back in the following season. They would become dead.

In today's lesson, based on the first two chapters of the book of the prophet Amos, God talks about destroying both the fruit and the roots of unrepentant sinners. Does that threat apply to you? What kind of fruits do you produce? What kind of roots do you have? Can you withstand God's fire when it comes on sinners? What can you do to have a firewall instead of being a wall on fire? Those and more are the issues that we shall examine in today's lesson.

1. How can you make the hard-hearted listen to you?

There is the story of a hen-pecked man who was so hungry but was not bold enough to ask his wife to prepare his dinner. He came to her where she was watching television and said quite timidly, “Darling, shall we eat dinner tonight?” In our relationships with spouses, siblings, bosses or colleagues, we come to know how best to speak to them to make them listen to us. Perhaps you do not want to offend their feelings but you need to tell them the truth. Some times, you are afraid because they can punish or reward you. Or you may find that they have hardened their hearts because they know what you are coming to say and do not like to hear it.

If you find yourself in such situations, you may need to change your method of communication. One well established way is called the *projective* technique. You speak about a third person that has the profile of the person you want to speak to and put your target in a position to pronounce judgment or an opinion on that third person or to see what happens to others in a similar situation. In most cases, it opens up your target to see things from an *empathetic* perspective.

Take the example of David after he had had an adulterous affair with the wife of one of his soldiers, Uriah, whom he got killed in battle so as to marry her [2 Sam. 11: 1-27]. You can be sure that while the king was doing those things, people (palace staff and advisers) knew what he was doing and could have cautioned him to no avail. In due course, God sent one of them, the prophet Nathan, to tell David about his sins and God’s judgment. Instead of going straight to the matter, the prophet told David a story! An exceedingly rich and powerful man left his own flock but took the only ewe lamb of his poor neighbour to entertain his visitor. David was so angry that he pronounced, “As the Lord lives, the man who has done this will surely die!” The prophet turned to the king and said, “You are the man!” [2 Sam. 12: 1-7]. By his own mouth, David had pronounced judgment on his own sins. That is the projective technique for you. In today’s Bible text, God used the same technique to reach the children of Israel.

2. Background: God applies the projective technique!

Amos, a farmer-turned prophet came from Tekoa, a little place south of Jerusalem in the Southern kingdom of Judah. God sent him to prophesy to the Northern kingdom of Israel during the time that Uzziah was the king of Judah, and Jeroboam, the son of Joash, was the king of Israel [Amos 1: 1]. To differentiate him from Jeroboam, the first king of the Northern kingdom of Israel, we shall call the Jeroboam of our study Jeroboam II.

Jeroboam II reigned for forty-one years “and he did evil in the sight of the Lord; he did not depart from all the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat who had made Israel sin” [2 Kgs 14: 23-24]. In spite of his wickedness, God granted Jeroboam II victory over the enemy because He did not allow the name of Israel to be blotted

out “from under heaven” [vv. 26-27]. Israel prospered materially but was spiritually bankrupt. Rather than see that as God’s grace and a basis for repentance, Jeroboam II behaved as if God had endorsed his waywardness! That was the setting when God sent Amos to Israel. In eight different prophecies, he conveyed to Israel how God was going to judge the sins of the land. How do you speak to such stubborn people? God used the projective technique that we can caption as follows:

a) *‘See what I will do to your neighbours’*

At the time, Israel’s neighbours, such as Syria and Philistia, were much weaker and were not in a position to threaten Israel. Yes, in the past, Syrian troops came from Damascus and “threshed Gilead with implements of iron” [Amos 1: 3]. The Philistines had collaborated with Edom, and had forgotten the covenant of brotherhood with Israel when they delivered Israelite captives to Edom [vv. 6, 9]. For such ‘minor’ sins, God was going to punish them by sending “a fire into the house of Hazael (the founding Syrian king), which (would) devour the palaces of Ben-Hadad (the then reigning king)... and the people of Syria (would) go captive to Kir” [vv. 4, 5]. The protective walls in the Philistine cities of Gaza and Tyre, God would set on fire and it would “devour its palace” [vv. 7, 10]. God would discomfit Ashdod, Ashkelon and Ekron while the remnant of the Philistines would perish [v. 8].

In places where God’s fire falls, the effect can be devastating. For example, when some people, led by Korah, rebelled against Moses in the wilderness, “a fire came out from the Lord and consumed five hundred and fifty men who were offering incense” [Num. 16: 35]. When king Ahaziah, the successor to wicked Ahab, sent his soldiers to go and arrest Elijah, the prophet prayed for God’s protection and “the fire of God came down from heaven and consumed” the captain and his fifty men [2 Kgs 1: 9-12]. So, how can any wall built by human hands withstand the consuming fire from God?

b) *‘See what I will do to your cousins and brothers’*

It was quite easy for the king and people of Israel to rationalize what God would do to the Gentile nations around them. After all, were they not meant to be destroyed or conquered by Joshua when he led the children of Israel to occupy the Promised Land [Josh. Chaps. 12-13]? That is like when we hear bad news concerning people we do not know. We may sympathize but can hardly empathize with them. Therefore, God needed to bring the message closer home to Israel. So, the prophet Amos also brought prophecies concerning Israel’s cousins (Edom, Ammon and Moab) and the brother-kingdom, Judah [Amos 1: 11-2: 5]. Edom was the nation of the descendants of Esau, the twin brother of Jacob, the father of the twelve tribes of Israel [Gen. 25: 30; 32: 3], while the Ammonites and Moabites were the descendants of Abraham’s nephew, Lot [Gen. 19: 36-38]. Perhaps, the people

of Israel would repent if they knew how God planned to judge their blood relations.

You will recall that Jacob tricked his brother, Esau, to wrest the birthright from him [Gen. 25: 29-34; 27: 1-29]. As a result, Esau hated his brother and threatened to kill him after their father's death [Gen. 27: 41]. They later reconciled [Gen. 33: 1-16]. However, Edom, the nation of Esau's descendants, still "pursued his brother with the sword, and cast off all pity (and) his anger tore perpetually, and he kept his wrath forever" [Amos 1: 11]. For the unforgiving spirit, God would set fire on its cities and palaces [v. 12] .

Ammon practised abomination "because they ripped open the women with child in Gilead, that they might enlarge their territory" [v. 13]. Cousin Moab "burned the bones of the king of Edom to lime" [Amos 2: 1]. For their punishment, God would set fire on their cities and palaces, and slay their judges and princes [Amos 1: 14; 2: 2].

How about Judah that had a much better record of closeness to God than Israel's other relatives? They were not any better because they paid lip service to His commandments and "their lies (led) them astray, lies which their fathers (had) followed" [Amos 2: 4].. Would God spare them? No. He would also set fire upon Judah and the palaces of Jerusalem [v. 5] .

c) *'So why do you think I will treat you differently?'*

Having demonstrated to Israel that He is not a partial God, that He does not acquit the guilty, He then confronted them with their own situation, which was much more sordid. They sold the righteous for silver and the poor for a pair of sandals [v. 6]. They panted after the dust of the earth which was on the head of the poor and perverted the way of the humble [v. 7]. A man and his father slept with the same woman to defile God's holy name [v. 7]. They practised idol worship [v. 8]. They were ungrateful, forgetting how God had taken them out of bondage in Egypt and established them in the land of the Amorites whose "fruit above and ... roots beneath" He had destroyed [vv. 9-10]. God had raised up some of their sons as prophets and Nazirites but the people shut up the prophets and polluted the Nazirites with wine [vv. 11-12]. To sum up the charges against Israel, God said, "Behold, I am weighed down by you, as a cart full of sheaves is weighed down" [v. 13].

That is serious! Do you know how much you have weighed God down by your sins and continuing rebellion? Now, you have wealth , power and position and you think you no longer need Him. When you earned little, you paid your tithes because they were also little. Now that you earn a fortune, you are reluctant to pay. When you were on the struggling side of the fence, you were faithful to your spouse. Now that you have made it, you are running after younger lovers outside. When you were a younger priest, pastor or evangelist,

you were available to meet the religious needs of your flock. Now you are too big for such chores that you delegate to unspiritual praise singers that now monopolise your attention space. Can you afford to continue to weigh God down?

3. God's judgment can be swift and deadly!

With Israel's Gentile neighbours and blood relations, God's judgment would destroy their palaces and walls. Israel's own judgment would be worse because in order to plant them, God had completely destroyed the fruit and the roots of their enemies [**Amos 2: 9**]. To whom much is given, much is expected. Here is what God planned to do to Israel [**vv. 14-16**]:

- The swift would lose their ability to run
- The strong would lose power
- The mighty would be unable to deliver himself
- Sophisticated military weapons would be of no effect; and
- "The most courageous men of might (would) flee naked in that day

As if to demonstrate the certainty of the prophecy, Jeroboam II's son, Zechariah, who continued in his father's evil ways ruled for only six months! He was killed by conspirators "in front of the people" [**2 Kgs 15: 8-10**]. The Northern kingdom of Israel was the first to go into captivity in Assyria, and its kingship lineage became extinct. This is how the Scriptures summarise their end [**2 Kgs 17: 16-18**]:

*So they left all the commandments of the Lord their God, made for themselves (idols) and worshipped all the hosts of heaven... and they caused their sons and daughters to pass through the fire, practised witchcraft and soothsaying, and sold themselves to do evil in the sight of the Lord, to provoke him to anger. **Therefore, the Lord was very angry with Israel, and removed them from His sight; there was none left but the tribe of Judah alone.***

Their fruits and roots were completely removed. In place of Israel, you can put the names of people around you (because most of us hardly want to apply truth to ourselves!). Do you put earthly treasures over God? That is idolatry. Do you allow your children to go into gangs or cults? Do you yourself belong to cults or have you sworn satanic oaths for political or other gains? Then, you are into witchcraft and soothsaying. You are provoking God to send His fire to consume not only your fruits but your roots. Is that what you want? I doubt it!

4. Conclusion: Make Jesus your firewall!

A firewall is an Internet device that inspects traffic passing through your computer and denies or permits passage based on a set of rules.¹ That way, you can minimize the amount of junk mail and viruses that you receive through the Internet. It functions the same way as fire doors in buildings which are erected to contain or delay structural fire from spreading to adjacent structures.²

The word of God says, “The name of the Lord is a strong tower; the righteous run to it and are safe, but the rich man’s wealth is his strong city, and like a high wall in his own esteem” [Prov. 18: 10-11]. That suggests two types of firewalls- the Lord or the world. From today’s study, we know that no human firewall, no matter how strong, can withstand the fire of God when it descends. God’s fire can take out both the fruits and the roots. But when God sees the blood of Jesus on you because you have confessed your sins and repented, He will withhold judgment and grant you grace!

In the words of Jesus, “Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire” [Matt. 7: 19]. For you to bear good fruits, Jesus must be the vine of your branches and without Him, you can do nothing. God the Father is the vinedresser [Jn 15: 1, 5]. The vine and the branches are *organically* linked to the roots, your spiritual self. When you are Spirit-led, then you are alive. When you are carnally minded, your roots and fruits are dead.

Make Jesus your firewall or else you will be a wall on fire!

¹ ‘Firewall,’ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Firewall_\(networking\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Firewall_(networking))

² Id.