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LIGHTNING ALWAYS PRECEDES THUNDER!

Today's Text: Amos Chaps. 3-6

Extracts:

Hear this word that the Lord has spoken... “Can two walk together, unless they are agreed? Will a lion roar in the forest, when he has no prey? Will a young lion cry out of his den, if he has caught nothing? Will a bird fall into a snare on the earth, where there is no trap for it? Will a snare spring up from the earth, if it has caught nothing at all? If a trumpet is blown in a city, will not the people be afraid? If there is calamity in a city, will not the Lord have done it? *Surely the Lord God does nothing, unless He reveals His secret to His servants the prophets*” [Amos 3: 1, 6, 7]

One thing I used to enjoy as a child was my maternal grandmother's ability to satisfy my insatiable curiosity. Once, during a thunderstorm that caused flooding in our village, I asked her where thunder and lightning came from. Without any hesitation, she told me that lightning was the angry Son of God who wanted to come down to avenge His crucifixion. Thunder was His mother pleading with Him to be patient because those who had killed Him were no longer on earth!

In deed, grandma was not the only one with a 'theory' about thunder and lightning. The Greeks and other ancient cultures also had their explanations.¹ However, based on scientific data, thunder is caused by the bolt of electricity generated in a lightning strike. The air around the lightning bolt is super heated and, as it cools and contracts, it creates a shockwave that manifests as thunder. Therefore, lightning is always accompanied by thunder.² When you see the flash of lightning in the skies, know for sure that thunder will soon follow.

In today's study, God says that He does nothing unless He first reveals His secret to His servants the prophets. In other words, the Lord will always warn us before He executes judgment. Every result has a cause, just as flashing lightning heralds rumbling thunder. What is the state of your relationship with God right now? Has He spoken lately with you about it? If He has done so, have you heard Him? If you have heard, have you turned a new leaf?

Those and more are the issues that we shall examine in today's lesson.

¹ 'What Causes Thunder?' www.wisegeek.com/what-causes-thunder.htm

² Op. cit.

1. Caught unawares?

In reaction to unexpected or unanticipated developments, you may have said (or heard people say) the following “You surprised me!” “What a pleasant surprise!” “You caught me unawares!” Is it really true that people get caught unawares? Let us examine a few scenarios:

- *The tell-tale signs were there but we ignored them or did not take notice*

Some of us are not interested in knowing beyond the present. You will hear them say such things as “We shall cross the bridge when we get there.” Some people cannot handle complexities or fast-moving events; they can only deal with episodes, one at a time. Therefore, even when the tell-tale signs are all around them, they will not notice or may choose to ignore them. Sometimes, we may not even understand what they mean. For example, while leading His disciples to Jerusalem where He was soon going to be crucified, Jesus took the twelve apostles aside and told them clearly, “We are going to Jerusalem, and all things that are written by the prophets concerning the Son of Man will be accomplished, for He will be delivered to the Gentiles, ... they will .. kill Him. And on the third day He will rise again.” Did it mean anything to them? Not at all because they did not understand it for the saying “was hidden from them” until after His resurrection [**Lk 18: 31-34**].

- *We were pre-warned but ignored or refused to heed it*

Sometimes, we know what to expect but choose to ignore it or refuse to do something about it. For example, Jesus warned Peter well in advance that He was going to deny Him thrice during His trial. Instead of heeding the warning, Peter said, “Even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You!” But a few hours later, he denied Jesus three times, just as he had been pre-warned [**Matt. 26: 30-35, 69-75**]!

God does not want us to be caught unawares. That is why He has spoken and keeps speaking to us. You may ask, “How can I know that God speaks or has spoken to me?” The following ways illustrate (but do not exhaust) how God is constantly speaking to us:³

a) *Through His creations*

If we believe that God created heaven and earth [**Gen. 1: 1**], the world and those who dwell in it [**Ps. 24: 1**], and that “the firmament shows His handiwork” [**Ps. 19: 1**], then we can accept that He is speaking to us each new day through His creations. For example, Jesus used the birds of the air and the

³ ‘How do I know that it is God speaking to me?’ *Weekly Bible Study Series*, Vol. 1, No. 2 , 1 July 2000, www.bibleresourcecentre.com

lilies of the field to demonstrate God's care for us and why we do not need to worry about our earthly cares. The birds neither sow nor reap but God feeds them. Therefore, we humans that are more important to God (than animals and plants) should "seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things shall be added" to us [**Matt. 6: 25-34**]. Paul used the structure and integrated functioning of the human body to teach how the body of Christ should function [**1 Cor. 12: 12-27**]. Therefore, even when we do not go to church regularly or believe in anything, God has put conscience within us that will always alert us that we are doing right or wrong. That is why even in pagan religions, they frown at incest and murder as in Christianity. God created all humans in His own image and likeness.

b) *Through the Written Word*

At various times and places and in various ways, God has spoken to us through prophets. In the last days, He did so through His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, who came to earth in flesh [**Heb. 1: 1-2**]. His words have been recorded in Scriptures that we now commonly call the Holy Bible. It contains God's secrets that He has chosen to share with us and we are commanded to obey [**Deut. 29: 29**]. God's word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our paths [**Ps. 119: 105**]. If studied and meditated upon night and day and obeyed, it can make us prosperous and have good success [**Josh. 1: 8**]. God's written word, the Scripture, has been given by God's inspiration and "is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction (and) for instruction in righteousness" [**2 Tim. 3: 16**]. Therefore, we cannot claim ignorance of hearing from God when we have His written word.

Jesus illustrated this point in the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus. While suffering in hell, the rich man begged Abraham to send someone from the dead to warn his five brothers on earth to repent. Abraham replied, "If they do not hear Moses and the prophets (as recorded in the Written Word), neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead" [**Lk 16: 19-31**]. How can we claim that God has not spoken to us when we have the Bible at our disposal?

c) *Through dreams, visions and prophecies*

In spite of the completeness of the word of God in the Bible, God still speaks to us today as in the past. We are in the last days during which time He promised to pour out of His Spirit on all flesh and we will be able to dream dreams, see visions or prophesy [**Joel 2: 28**]. That is similar to what God told Aaron and Miriam when they questioned their brother, Moses' spiritual credentials, "If there is a prophet among you, I, the Lord, make Myself known to him in a vision; I speak to him in a dream. Not so with My servant Moses;... I speak with him face to face" [**Num. 12: 6-8**].

We can see the Written Word then as the constitution that guides our relationship with God, just as a nation's constitution is its supreme authority on legal matters. When there is a dispute in interpretation, we go to the Supreme Court of the land and its judgment is final. God is the sole Judge on His word. Therefore, He is the Supreme Court on the Written Word.

A good example is the law of inheritance under the Law of Moses. When a man died, his estate went to his firstborn son. However, a man died who had only daughters. They came to Moses to ask for possession. Moses brought the case before the Lord who gave him the following "amendment" to the law: "If a man dies and has no son, then you shall cause his inheritance to pass to his daughter" [Num. 27: 1-8]. So, as we face contemporary challenges, God chooses how to minister His word to us. Sometimes, He may quicken our spirits by 'popping up' a verse in Scriptures to meet our immediate need. Or, He may appear to us in dreams, just as He did when He sent an angel to inform Joseph of his virgin wife, Mary's pregnancy [Matt. 1: 19-20]. He may reach us in visions, just as Jesus appeared to Saul on his way to persecute believers in Damascus [Acts 9: 1-6]. He may speak to us through prophets, just as Jesus spoke with John about end times on the island of Patmos [Rev. 1: 1]. In such cases, God's purpose is to give us His final position on our situation (a promise or a warning) that is consistent with His Written Word. A popular word for it is *Rhema* (the Written Word is called *Logos*). In today's lesson, God sent messages to Israel through the prophet Amos.

2. But God never catches us unawares!

As a popular saying goes, "to be fore-warned is to be fore-armed." Before thunder (judgment) started to rumble, God sent three lightning flashes to the nation of Israel through Amos because "the Lord God does nothing unless He reveals His secret to His servants the prophets" [Amos 3: 7]. The three messages were prefixed with "Hear this word..." [Amos 3: 1; 4: 1; 5: 1]. The messages are quite pertinent to our own circumstances. So, you should hear this word too!

a) 1st Message: *Sin will surely be judged*

To whom much is given, much is expected. Having delivered them out of bondage in Egypt, the children of Israel should have known better. God reminded them, "You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities" [Amos 3: 1-2]. In an effect-cause sequence, God laid out to Israel the iron law between judgment and sin as follows [Amos 3: 3-6]:

- *Can two walk together unless they are agreed?*
- *Will a lion roar in the forest when he has no prey?*
- *Will a young lion cry out of his den if he has caught nothing?*
- *Will a bird fall into a snare on the earth where there is no trap for it?*
- *Will a snare spring up from the earth if it has caught nothing at all?*

- *If a trumpet is blown in a city, will not the people be afraid?*
- *If there is calamity in a city, will not the Lord have done it?*

Simply put, how can you not expect God's judgment when you persist in sin? In the case of Israel, God would set "an adversary all around the land (who would) sap (their) strength from (them) (and plunder their) palaces." The "altars of Bethel" where they made abominable offerings as well as the people's winter and summer houses would be completely destroyed [vv. 11-15]. They had been warned but had refused to heed.

What is the contribution of sin to global warming? Is everything attributable to environmental degradation alone? Why are hurricanes and winter storms getting more ferocious than in the past? Why is there so much violence in hitherto peaceful countries of the world? Why is HIV/AIDS more widespread in gay communities and tourist zones than in other places? We may answer by quoting God's message through Amos, "If there is calamity in a city, will not the Lord have done it?"

b) *2nd Message: Yet the people continue to sin*

In spite of God's chastening for their sins, the people refused to heed His warnings. This is how He put it, "I overthrew some of you; as God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah, and you were like a firebrand plucked from the burning; yet you have not returned to Me" [Amos 4: 11]. They suffered drought, famine, pestilence, fire and destruction; yet they would not give up sinning [vv. 6-10, 11]. Their zeal for hypocritical worship did not abate [vv. 4-5] as if they could bribe God! But God is "He who forms mountains, and creates the wind, who declares to man what his thought is" [vv. 12, 13]. If He were hungry, He would not tell man because the world is His and all its fullness [Ps. 50: 12].

God prefers obedience to sacrifice [1 Sam. 15: 22]. God does not give anybody grace to sin against Him. You either obey completely or not obey at all because if you are lukewarm, God will spew you out of His mouth [Rev.3: 16].

c) *3rd Message: Repentance is the only sure way to restoration*

The final message to Israel was quite blunt: "Seek the Lord and live; lest He break out like fire in the house of Joseph, and devour it, with no one to quench it in Bethel" [Amos 5: 6]. He added [vv. 12-15]:

*For I know your manifold transgressions and your mighty sins; afflicting the just and taking bribes; diverting the poor from justice at the gate. Therefore the prudent keep silent at that time, for it is an evil time. **Seek good and not evil that you may live; so the Lord of hosts will be with***

you... Hate evil, love good; establish justice in the gate; it may be that the Lord God of hosts will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.

In place of Joseph, you can put your place of residence, work or worship and you will be amazed how deep we are in spiritual waywardness. As the prophet Amos warned his people, “Woe to you who put far off the day of doom, who cause the seat of violence to come near, who lie on beds of ivory, ... but are not grieved for the affliction of Joseph” [Amos 6: 3-7]. Just as captivity came to all, so would a collapsing economy or an unprovoked war on the helpless (through rigged elections, bribery and corruption) spread its hardship to all who do not use their privileged positions to do good and not evil.

3. Conclusion: It is lightning that kills!

We hardly relate effect to cause. That is why we run away from the effect instead of from the cause. Lightning causes thunder. We scamper for cover when lightning flashes because we think that it is thunder that kills. However, it is lightning that kills- it electrocutes victims. They die before thunder comes. In like manner, it is sin that leads to death, not God’s judgment for the soul that sins shall die [Ezek. 18: 4].

God asked the house of Israel, “Did you offer Me sacrifices and offerings in the wilderness forty years?” [Amos 5: 25]. They did not. All that God asked of them was obedience but, on account of disobedience, thousands of them died in the wilderness [Num. 26: 64-64]. So, stop deceiving yourself. Enough of that hollow religiousness that can only give you human recognition and church ranks. God wants to see your obedience.

Lightning always precedes thunder!