

AMOS WAS another prophet to emerge in the “good times” of the Northern Kingdom during the second half of the reign of Jeroboam II. Like Jonah, he too declared the impartiality of God, who dealt equitably with one and all in accordance with His covenant promises. Those who fulfilled its conditions would be blessed, no matter who they were, while those who failed to meet its conditions would be judged. To those who regarded themselves as better than others, as privileged in the sight of God—as Israel did during those good times—Amos' message came as a brutal corrective.

Amos first delivered a series of warnings against the countries surrounding Israel: Syria, the Philistines, Tyre, Edom, Ammon and Moab were all going to be destroyed because of their cruelty. Even his home country of Judah did not escape the prophet's denouncement. It would be set ablaze because it had failed to keep the Mosaic Law and followed after false gods. Then Amos started launching one volley after another against the crimes, injustices and debauchery of the Northern Kingdom.

He began by reminding the people of the special relationship Israel once had with Jehovah. He had chosen them from among all the peoples of the earth and delivered them from the bondage of slavery in Egypt. They had walked with God and He had given them prophets to reveal His secrets to them. Now, however, they would be treated no differently than the surrounding nations because they had proved to be just as ungodly as they were. Like them they had erected idols, notably the golden calves at the shrines in Dan and Bethel representing fertility and wellbeing. As a result “an enemy will overrun the land”, Israel would be destroyed, and the people exiled.

Amos communicated his message in graphic terms, drawing from his experience as a shepherd: “as a shepherd saves from the lion's mouth only two leg bones or a piece of an ear, so will the Israelites be saved”. He reminded the people of all the times God had tried to awaken them, to stop them in their tracks, and to prevent their downward trend. God had sent famine, drought, blight, pestilence, and war—but it was all in vain: the wealthy and powerful continued to exploit the poor and take bribes in their quest for ever larger homes and vineyards. There was no justice in the land.

Amos not only thundered against the numerous social injustices of the era of Jeroboam II, he also called people back to a proper relationship with Jehovah God: “Thus says the Lord to Israel: 'Seek me and live!' He called on them to repent of their ways, to call upon the God of their salvation, the one who loved them, and the one who patiently tried to awaken them spiritually and draw them back into a proper, covenant relationship with Himself. He also addressed the superficially religious people who attended all the rituals and ceremonies while at the same time complaining about the mess in their society, and that they could not wait for God to come and straighten matters out. Amos told them that when “the day of the Lord” came it would be a day of darkness, not of light. God was not on their side. He despised their

hypocritical religious activities, their burnt offerings, and the noise of their songs and the melody of their harps.

Others were complacent, enjoying the good things in life while poor people were being exploited and judgement in the courts was being perverted. To them Amos declared, “woe to those who are at ease in Zion. Woe to those who lie on ivory beds or on their couches eating lamb or beef and who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp”. The prophet urged them to “let justice roll like waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream!”

Neither the people nor Amaziah, the high priest of the false shrine at Bethel, took kindly to Amos' message. Amaziah complained to king Jeroboam II, “Amos is conspiring against you. He is declaring that you will die by the sword, and that Israel will be exiled from the land”. He also told Amos to leave Israel, that if he insisted on prophesying he should do so back in his home country of Judah: “Don't ever prophesy at Bethel again, because it is the king's sanctuary and a temple of the kingdom”.

Amos responded bluntly, stressing that he was a mere herdsman and farmer, but that the Lord had taken him from his flock and told him to prophesy to the people of Israel. He then predicted a terrible judgement against Amaziah: his wife would be violated, his children would be killed, the nation exiled, and he himself would die in a pagan country.

God had in mind to bring immediate judgement in the form of locusts and fire, but because of Amos' intercession on behalf of Israel He relented. Then the Lord showed him a vision of a plumb line that symbolized the Mosaic covenant, the standard by which the people would be judged. The repressive social injustice of their society went against the standard of holiness to which they were called (Ex. 19:6), and consequently both the shrines at Dan and Bethel and the dynasty of Jeroboam II would be destroyed. Judgement had been delayed, but the end was at hand. The nation would be plucked off like fruit ready for the harvest. God would spare His people no longer. They would cry out in desperation for a word from the Lord but He would be silent then. It would be too late. God would regard the Israelites who had prided themselves as being “God's chosen people” as no different from the pagan nations around them.

Yet in the gloom Amos also saw a glimmer of hope. Israel would be destroyed—but not totally. A tiny remnant would remain. Although most would perish, the purging of the coming judgement would produce a remnant faithful to the Lord. From those few the Lord would restore the house of David. And although the imminent future of the Northern Kingdom was bleak, Amos could also see beyond judgement and exile to a future period of glorious restoration and prosperity for the faithful remnant.

Later the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah and Micah would pick up this theme of the remnant (Isa. 9:6-7; Jer. 33:15, 17; Mic. 5:2). They too would affirm that God's covenant with David would not be abrogated, even in times of divine judgement. One day David's “greater son”, the Lord Jesus, would sit on the throne and not only Israel, but also all the nations of the world would be blessed through him. Centuries later, at the first council of the church, the apostle James reminded the delegates of Amos' prophecy that all the nations, even the gentiles, would bear the name of the Lord (Acts 15:17).

THE PROPHET Hosea, like Amos, also ministered to the Northern Kingdom, which he often referred to as Ephraim, its biggest tribe. Hosea's life became a tragic drama illustrating God's love for His people, the deceitful attractiveness of the world, and the faithlessness of the human heart.

While still a bachelor Hosea started warning the nation of God's impending judgment for breaking the terms of the Mosaic covenant. He told them that God would raise up the scourge of the Assyrians to sweep across the land. But the people paid him no heed. His message of impending judgement did not accord with their experience of the good times they were enjoying under Jeroboam II. As for the king, he tried to form a political alliance with Assyria, the very nation Hosea was decrying.

When no one paid attention to him the Lord told Hosea to marry a girl named Gomer, and told him up front how Gomer would become unfaithful to him, just as Israel had become unfaithful to Jehovah God. In fact, she would become a street prostitute... just like Israel had prostituted itself to various idols. God also told Hosea that they would have three children whom He would name for him. The prophet understood that instead of merely preaching the word of the Lord his sad marriage would be a living parable, an object lesson that reflected God's experience with Israel. So he courted Gomer and she eventually agreed to marry him. Hosea grew to love Gomer and before long they were expecting their first child. When the boy was born the Lord told him to call him Jezreel, which means "cast-off". The boy's off-putting name was a warning: the Lord would cast off Israel if it did not turn from its wicked ways.

Later Gomer gave birth to a baby girl. They were to call her Loruhamah, which means, "Not pitied" because God would cease to pity His people. He would hand them over to the cruel Assyrians if they did not turn from their rebellious ways. After Loruhamah, Gomer gave birth to another baby boy. He was to be called Loammi, which means, "Not my people". God was saying, "I will not be your God, and you will not be My people anymore."

Then Gomer started to fulfil the Lord's somber prediction: she became unfaithful. Hosea arrived home one day to discover that she had left him and their children for another man. That man, however, soon tired of her and passed her on to someone else. Hosea was heartbroken and shamed by his wife's behaviour.

Gomer's situation went from bad to worse until she was completely destitute and sold herself into slavery. When word of his wife's situation got back to Hosea the Lord told him to go and buy her back: "Love her as the Lord loves Israel." So Hosea found her owner, paid him off, and led his wife home. "If you refuse to be intimate with another man I will live with you and take care of you," he promised, once again pledging his love to her.

In the end Gomer became a faithful, caring wife and mother. Although her willful evil desires had taken her to the depths of shame and disgrace, Hosea's love and faithfulness eventually broke through to her.

While all this was taking place Hosea continued with deep emotion and tears to warn the people of Israel that God was about to judge them by means of the Assyrians. He knew that God had experienced the same range of emotions for Israel that he had felt for Gomer. "How can I give you up?" he records God asking with heartbreaking sadness. Those He loved deeply had spurned Him. "Like Adam, they have broken the covenant," the Lord complained through his prophet. He would go so far as to "block her path and wall her in" to keep Israel from chasing after idols the way Gomer chased after her lovers. In spite of the fact that the Lord had nurtured Israel from her earliest days as a nation, even though He had drawn her with cords of kindness, Israel had cruelly spurned Him. Its love and devotion to Him, said the Lord, was like the morning mist that soon disappears.

Hosea also used the metaphor of a half-baked pancake to describe Israel. On the outside their religious rituals looked good, but close inspection showed that her priests rejected the knowledge of God and that the people's hearts were bound to their idols. Instead of hypocritical lip service and sacrifices the Lord wanted mercy and righteousness. Israel had "sown the wind" by looking to Assyria as a possible powerful ally instead of looking towards Him and as a result they would "reap the whirlwind"; Assyria would sweep over them, swallow them up, and take them all away. Their capital city Samaria would be laid waste, their high places destroyed, and they would become wanderers among the nations.

Yet in spite of all the sorrow God experienced in His relationship with Israel He refused to let go of them altogether. He was still wooing them, inviting them to reject the overtures of Assyria: "Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God, for you have stumbled because of your iniquity. Return to the Lord and say to him, 'Assyria will not save us... say, 'our God' no more to your idols'".

Hosea's message to Israel contained an amazing prediction about a time when Israel would be without a king and without the sacrificial system in the temple. He then anticipated a day towards the end of history when Israel would, at long last, turn back to God, her true husband, and seek His blessing. Like Gomer, Israel would come back home trembling. God's response to such heart-felt repentance would be wonderful: "I will heal their faithlessness; I will love them freely, for my anger has turned from them... Israel will blossom, will be beautiful and will flourish like a garden!" In fact, one day the names of Hosea and Gomer's children will be reversed. He will say to those named "Not My People", "You Are My People" and they would whole-heartedly respond, "You are My God". Just like Hosea had ransomed his wife, the Lord would ransom Israel from the power of the grave: "Where, O death, are your plagues? Where, O grave is your destruction?" Hosea records the Lord shouting victoriously at this prospect. Centuries later, the apostle Paul would quote this verse as he described the Christian believer's resurrection from the dead (1 Cor. 15:55).

