

Daniel-Micah: Studies of Integrity - Good Men in Bad Times - Lesson 2

Amos, Hosea and Micah: God Proclaims Sin's Consequences & Forgiveness' Benefits.

I. Book of Amos.

A. Introduction: Prophet and Setting.

In this segment of our course, we look at three eighth-century prophets: Amos, Hosea, and Micah. Amos and Hosea prophesied in the north among the northern ten tribes, and Micah prophesied in the south. Amos was a southerner who was involved in agribusiness. He describes himself, in chapter 7, as a shepherd and also as a fig pricker, someone who was in the business of providing the little pricks to the figs that caused them to fluff up and become more juicy as they matured. He was a southerner traveling in the north who undoubtedly went to various fields in his business, and also stayed in and around the cities and towns of the region of the north that is called Samaria. While there, he observed much social injustice; and God called him, as well as the other eighth-century prophets, to preach against that social injustice.

What was the nature of it? Well, what had happened in Israel was something that should never have happened. People ignored the covenant law; they ignored the law that God had given His people through Moses. That law provided for equitable distribution of the land and the access of every citizen to a portion of land. It also emphasized the fact that the rich had a responsibility not to take things away from the poor, and provided elaborate regulations to protect poor people from getting even poorer at the hands of those who manipulated them.

But sadly, by the eighth century B.C. in Israel, these laws were no longer considered useful or valuable by most of the people; and as a result, large numbers of people who had been impoverished in the countryside had left their farms and had moved to the cities. There, they were absolutely dependent upon whatever jobs they could get. The rich were buying up the farms that had been abandoned and were adding, as Isaiah says at one place, "field to field and house to house."

As they got richer, they wanted even more, and they developed a class system. They developed not only the nobility and the rest of the citizenry, but the nobility and then the upper classes, and then the middle classes, and then the lower classes. One way people could make money was to sell any sort of product or foodstuff to the poor in the cities at tremendous rates. Those who had the farms in the countryside could get that produce, bring it into the cities, sell it where more and more of the population was concentrated (at greatly inflated prices), make tremendous profits for themselves, but keep the poor even poorer.

B. Pronouncements of Judgment (Am 1:1-2:16).

Amos was inspired by God to speak out against that. In the first two chapters of the book of Amos, we find oracles, that is, prophetic messages of judgment, against Israel's neighbor states. And so Damascus, the capital of Syria, is condemned by God for its several sins. Gaza and other

cities of the Philistines are condemned for their several sins, and so for Tyre, the great Phoenician city, and so for the Edomites, and so for the Ammonites, and also for Moab.

Then all of a sudden in Amos 2:4, we find Judah added to the list: "For three sins of Judah, even for four, I will not turn back my wrath. Because they have rejected the law of the Lord and have not kept his decrees, because they have been led astray by false gods", and then extensive judgment on Israel. It becomes clear, in fact, that these other prophecies against foreign nations were used to lead into a prophecy against Israel as if it, too, were a foreign nation, because in effect that is what it had become. It had become a nation that no longer trusted, believed in, or obeyed the laws of its Lord.

So we find, "For three sins of Israel, even for four, I will not turn back my wrath. They sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals (the practice of taking those people who are so poor that they no longer could even have food to eat because they could not buy it, and getting money for them by selling them into slavery). They trample on the heads of the poor as upon the dust of the ground, and deny justice to the oppressed. Father and son use the same girl and so profane my holy name." There are instances not only of the denial of justice to people who are oppressed, but also the practice of cultic prostitution, father and son "using the same girl."

"They lie down beside every altar on garments taken in pledge. In the house of their god", in other words, "not Me, but their god, they drink wine taken as fines," says the Lord. So these people getting rich off the poor were then engaging in the debauched excessive practices of idolatrous religion. And so God says that because of all of this kind of thing, "'I will crush you as a cart crushes when loaded with grain. The swift will not escape, the strong will not muster their strength, and the warrior will not save his life. The archer will not stand his ground, the fleet-footed soldier will not get away, and the horseman will not save his life. Even the bravest warriors will flee naked on that day,' declares the Lord."

In other words, "Judgment is coming against you in the form of war, Israel. You are going to be beaten in war; you are going to be conquered." And that was Amos' message to northern Israel. Now Amos also included, from time to time, words against Judah in his prophecies, so he was not simply addressing only the northern ten tribes. As he began to preach around 760 B.C., we believe, he was in fact announcing what would be accelerated by the coming of the Assyrian Empire. When Amos preached, the Assyrians were dormant; they were not much of a power. But by the time he concluded his prophecies, just distantly on the scene was the possibility of a resurgence of the long-dormant Assyrian Empire.

In fact, a few years after the time that Amos completed his preaching (that is, sometime around 745 B.C.), under the great Assyrian king Tiglath-Pileser III the Assyrians did begin to build an empire that began stretching closer and closer to Israel. By 722 B.C., long after Amos had finished his preaching, but within decades of the way his words rung in the ears of the Israelites and often stung as their reactions to him indicate, the whole territory of the northern ten tribes had fallen to Assyria and was no more a nation.

C. Judgments Against Israel and Judah (Am 3:1-6:14).

After chapters 1-2, there are four chapters (chapters 3-6) about judgments against Israel of various sorts. The prophet preached again and again, in this way and that, about the need for judgment upon the people of God. He included, from time to time, Judah in those announcements of doom. Listen to this example from chapter 6: "Woe to you who are complacent in Zion, and to you who feel secure on Mount Samaria", things were going well; it was relatively prosperous for the upper classes; they did not think the Assyrians would ever reach them, "you notable men of the foremost nation, to whom the people of Israel come! Go to Calneh and look at it; go from there to great Hamath, and then go down to Gath in Philistia." These were all destroyed places by the time Amos preached. "Are they better off than your two kingdoms? Is their land larger than yours? You put off the evil day and bring near a reign of terror. You lie on beds inlaid with ivory and lounge on your couches. You dine on choice lambs and fattened calves. You strum away on your harps like David . . . You drink wine by the bowlful . . . but you do not grieve over the ruin of Joseph. Therefore you will be among the first to go into exile; your feasting and lounging will end."

D. Visions and Restoration Promise (Am 7:1-9:15).

In chapters 7-9, there are five visions. Amos was a visionary; he saw pictures of what might happen. All of those pictures were of destruction, of doom, of God's judgment against His people. The book ends, however, with just a small section of hope and restoration for Israel. Chapter 9:11-15 is the only part of the book that is really hopeful or positive, as we might say it. Even though Amos was called to warn the people that their sins were finding them out, and that they would go into exile, would be destroyed as a people and as an independent nation, he wants them to know that God's faithfulness will one day visit them again. Long after many in his audience were dead, God would indeed restore the people of Israel to Himself.

He says these words in contrast to the great bulk of his preaching of woe: "'The days are coming,' declares the Lord, 'when the reaper will be overtaken by the plowman and the planter by the one treading grapes. New wine will drip from the mountains and flow from all the hills. I will bring back my exiled people Israel.'" So there is hope, always hope, because a faithful God, faithful to His promises to punish when His covenant is violated is also faithful to His promise never to utterly destroy His people, but always to provide for a remnant through whom His Word will work, through whom His Spirit will be manifest, and who will know the blessings of the Messiah in the coming age.

II. Book of Hosea.

A. Overview.

With the book of Hosea, we encounter another northern prophet, but this one is a native northern prophet of the eighth century B.C. Hosea was a virtual contemporary of Amos, probably beginning to preach around 753 B.C. or so, just a few years after Amos had begun to preach (around 760 B.C.). Hosea was called by God to announce or presage the events to take place in his lifetime by the way that he named his children. He is told to marry a "woman of

prostitution," which does not mean a prostitute because it goes on to say, "have children of prostitution", because the whole land is involved in prostitution in departing from the Lord.

This is a characteristic use of the concept of prostitution as we find it in many places in the Old Testament, especially in Hosea and also Ezekiel. It is used metaphorically. The idea behind it is this: A prostitute is kind of all the time unfaithful, repeatedly unfaithful, professionally unfaithful, and unfaithful sexually because of the gain involved. God's people are often described as engaging in "prostitution", that is, for the advantages that they perceive elsewhere, for what they think they can get from the gods and goddesses they believe in, they abandoned the Lord and His covenant and His Word.

So it is not that, in fact, Hosea married a woman of ill-repute, but rather that the whole north was so involved in idolatry and in the other cult practices associated with it, including syncretism, the melding together of beliefs and a materialistic life-style that idolatry encourages, and so on, that anybody he married and any children he had would be tainted by that powerful system so rife in the entire culture. His children get names that symbolize the judgment that is coming: Jezreel, the famous battles of Jezreel of the past made Jezreel a name something like Pearl Harbor, in other words a place where awful destruction and disaster would come; or the name for one of his children, Lo-Ruhamah, "no mercy"; or the name for his final child, Lo-Ammi, "not my people," because God predicts the fulfillment of the covenant promise of judgment in the form of rejection in these words, "Call him Lo-Ammi, for you are not my people, and I am not your God." Here the rejection of the people is predicted, as God plans to have them conquered and exiled to have their land lie waste for a long time.

B. Israel and God (Hos 1:1-3:5).

Chapters 1-3 in the book of Hosea mention in some way or another family relationships.

Chapter 2 contains a lengthy and powerful allegory of God's relationship to Israel in which Israel is described as always running away from Him, always unfaithful, always going after her lovers, that is, the gods and goddesses that she thought were giving her agricultural abundance. In the system of idolatry the concept was that if you fed the gods by your food offerings they would in turn exercise their power to give you abundance agriculturally. That was the quid pro quo; that was the deal of the concept of idolatry; in chapter 2 Hosea describes this, as he is inspired to do so in poetic fashion with the idea that Israel thinks her lovers, her false gods, have given her everything.

God predicts various punishments that will come, including "taking away my grain when it ripens and my new wine when it is ready. I will take back my wool and my linen, intended to cover her. I will expose her before the eyes of her lovers; no one will take her out of my hands. I will stop her celebrations." All these are predictions of the time of exile. One might think that the whole poem was going to continue in that vein, but suddenly there is a surprise ending. God says in verse 14, "Therefore I am now going to allure her; I will lead her into the desert and speak tenderly to her. There I will give her back her vineyards . . . There she will sing as in the days of her youth, as in the days she came up out of Egypt. In that day, you will call me 'my husband'; you will no longer call 'my baal,'" "my Lord," or "master" referring to the name of

the false gods, the Baals. In other words, after His punishment God will show mercy once again to His people.

Chapter 3 describes a marriage to another woman, a second wife. It describes the way in which he does not even consummate that marriage, as a symbol of the way that the Israelites will be far from those things they love and their God that they love when they are placed into exile.

C. Oracles of Judgment (Hos 4:1-8:14).

In chapters 4-8, there are many oracles of judgment, judgment for pride, judgment for idolatry, judgment for corruption; and in various ways Hosea is inspired to bring the changes on this unrepentant people who have sowed the wind and are going to reap the whirlwind.

D. Retribution Upon Israel (Hos 9:1-13 :16).

In chapters 9-13 , there are more prophecies of doom, especially emphasizing the certainty of divine judgment; and in particular, these often have a retrospective angle to them. Hosea is inspired to look back wistfully on the days when Israel was closer to God, the days closer to the time of the covenant of Moses when the people did tend to have a desire to depend upon the Lord, and to be faithful to Him, and to keep His law, to be eager to know His Word, and to obey it. But sadly, the people have increasingly corrupted themselves so that the nation of Israel deserves doom; Hosea's prophecies appear to go from the 750s all the way down to the 720s when, in fact, the Assyrians did completely wipe out Israel as a nation from the face of the earth, leaving only little Judah as one tribal territory exempt from being forced into their huge and powerful empire.

E. Future Blessing (Hos 14:1-9).

Chapter 14 describes hope again. It is often the case that prophetic books will have some woe followed by some weal in a pattern. Sometimes there is a lot of woe at the beginning and then weal (the good things to come thereafter), because the prophets are looking at the sweep of history. The immediate future is not bright, but the long-term future in God is always bright. Chapter 14 invites the people to return to Him in fulfillment of what we read about in Deuteronomy chapter 30, the predictions of the return of the Israelites to the Lord after the exile.

"Return O Israel, to the Lord your God. Your sins have been your downfall! Take words with you", in other words, words of confession and appeal for forgiveness and repentance, "and return to the Lord. Say to him: 'Forgive all our sins and receive us graciously, that we may offer the fruit of our lips.'" In other words, it is not going to be the sacrifices at the temple that will save them. It will be the words that they ask God with to help them, the appeal for forgiveness. This, of course, is what we have in Christ: our confession of sins, our calling upon the name of the Lord, our expression of desire to be repentant and to follow His ways. That is what Hosea anticipates when he predicts the repentance of the people in the future age.

III. Book of Micah.

A. Prediction of Judgment (Mic 1:1-3:12).

The prophet Micah follows along on the concepts that one finds in Amos and Hosea. In the prophet Micah, there are three progressions of woe, and then weal. In chapters 1-2, there are descriptions: in chapter 1, of the punishment of Samaria and Judah, and part of chapter 2, punishment on an oppressive nation. Then the bulk of the ending of chapter 2 is about reunification and an increase under the Lord's blessing. So it is woe, then followed by weal; it is the bad news first and the good news, the eventual restoration blessings, thereafter. In chapters 3-5 of this relatively short book, chapter 3 starts with woe. There is the prediction of the fall of the corrupt nation. Micah is preaching to Judeans; he does not preach in the north, and he is limiting most of his comments, not all but most, to Judah and Jerusalem, to the southern territory. His condemnation of corrupt leaders and of a corrupt capital city, Jerusalem, is very powerful in chapter 3.

B. Prediction of Restoration (Mic 4:1-5:15).

Then in chapters 4-5, we have predictions of the restoration, the eventual restoration, of Zion, and of the peace that will accompany that, of God's protection for Zion that increasingly is symbolizing the presence of God among His people and the benefits that His people can enjoy: what we would term as "life in Christ." There is the Messiah's birth, that wonderful passage in chapter 5 that tells us it will happen in Bethlehem, in Judea. Then there is the prediction of purification from idolatry at the end of chapter 5, then a final section of woe and weal in 6 and 7.

C. Plea for Repentance (Mic 6:1-7:20).

There is a kind of covenant lawsuit against Israel in chapter 6, in which the prophet imagines that God is like a prosecuting attorney and has called Israel into court. And He is laying out the case against Israel for all its violations of the covenant, all its law breaking, and declaring the nation guilty, and pronouncing a judgement sentence against them as if God had shifted from being the prosecutor now to the judge. With chapter 7 comes again the good news, the weal part of the woe/weal cycle. A lament is the form of that chapter. The lament does not just linger with the complaint and suffering and misery part of things; but it goes on to talk about, with great emphasis, God's deliverance, the trust, the assurance that God's people will in the future have in Him; and, indeed, their praise of Him as a people who will enjoy His benefits and blessings forever.