

Living Messages of the Books of The Bible

GENESIS TO MALACHI

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CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

THE MESSAGE OF AMOS

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- ii. Peoples chosen to be Depository of Truth must be righteous.
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II. To the Holy Nation

- i. No countenance to national sins.
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THE prophecy of Amos is unique in that it differs in some ways from the others in the Divine library. It is peculiar in that the prophet himself was neither a prophet, nor the son of a prophet. These terms, however, must be understood technically. When he declared “**I was no prophet; neither was I a prophet’s son,**” he meant that he was not recognized as a prophet, nor had he been to one of the schools of the prophets. In the language of our own day, he was a layman, and an untrained man withal.

The prophecy is preeminently peculiar in the matter of outlook. There is a most significant omission from this book. Amos never used the phrase so common in other writings, “**the God of Israel.**” His outlook was a far wider one. It is only as we recognize this fact that we can appreciate the real value of the book.

According to Amos, the Lord roars over Zion, and utters His voice over Jerusalem, but the things He has to say are said to Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Edom, Ammon, Moab, Judah, and Israel.

As we read these messages of the Lord we are impressed by the fact that there is no peculiar and startling gap between the first six and the last two. It is one continuous message beginning with the word of the Lord to Damascus and ending with His word to Israel.

Amos spoke as one who saw God to be not the God of Israel and Judah only, but also the God of Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Edom, Ammon and Moab.

In this prophecy, therefore, God is seen as detached, and yet directing; detached from the prophetic order, and yet directing through a man who became in the fullest, finest sense of the word a prophet; detached from every nation, and yet directing all, governing the affairs of each.

The permanent values of the book are three.

- first it gives us the philosophy of the Divine government in the comprehensiveness of its outlook.
- secondly it reveals the practice of the Divine government in that while the prophet was careful to begin with the distant nations in order to show that the principles of government are the same in all nations, his supreme illustration is that of the application to Israel.
- finally, in a brief and yet suggestive paragraph with which the book closes, we have the promise of the Divine government.

First, then, as to the philosophy. The fact of Divine government is recognized. Amos never affirmed it, never argued it, but from the first chapter to the last assumed it, and applied it. The supreme atmosphere of the book is that of the government of God. That fact being recognized, we discover in the method of the prophet a revelation of the method of God’s government. Amos reveals the standard of the requirement, the principle of the administration, and the patience of the method of God.

As to the standard of requirement; all the denunciations of the nations are denunciations called forth by the fact that they have harmed other nations.

- The charge against Syria was that of cruelty;
- Against Philistia, that of her slave trade;
- Against Phoenicia, that she had acted as slave agent in spite of a covenant made in which she promised not to do so;
- Against Edom, that of determined and revengeful unforgiveness;
- Against Amon, that of cruelty based upon cupidity;
- Against Moab, that of violent and vindictive hatred;
- Against Judah, the only case in which the description recognizes the relation of the people to God Himself, the charge was dismissed in a brief word as that of having been guilty of despising the laws of God.
- Finally, in the case of Israel the charge was that she had become corrupt, and had oppressed the poor and needy within her own borders.

Thus it will be seen that the denunciations of the nations were due to their having violated the rights of humanity; and thus it is evident that the standard of God's requirement in His government of the nations is that of their attitude towards other nations.

Then we have the principle of government revealed. We see that principle as we watch the method. The severest words of denunciation were reserved for Israel. The judgment described as falling upon her was far more terrible than that upon either of the other nations. It is impossible to read these messages without discovering that the principle of government is that light creates responsibility, and the nations are judged by God according to the light they have received.

National privilege spells national responsibility. If light be refused, then judgment is far severer than when light has been lacking. Finally, we have the patience of the method of God.

As we read these messages we, notice how each one begins. "**For three . . . and for four.**" This is a figurative way of declaring that God does not act immediately in judgment, but that He waits in order to give every nation the chance of repentance.

We have thus in this book not merely the revelation of the requirements, and of the standard, and of the patience of the government of God; but through these things we clearly see the aim of God in government.

- If cruelty makes Him angry, it is because His heart is set upon kindness.
- If oppression stirs up His wrath, it is because His purpose for man is that he should live in peace.
- If the sorrows inflicted upon man by man call down His judgment, it is because the one great desire of His heart for humanity is that of its well-being and happiness.

His government always moves towards the establishment of the best and highest conditions.

God is angry with everything that mars; strife, cruelty, war, oppression, because these are against the aim of His government.

In the closing paragraph in which the prophet looks on to the day of ultimate restoration of the chosen people, his words are full of suggestiveness.

“And I will bring again the captivity of my people of Israel, and they shall build the waste cities, and inhabit them; and they shall plant vineyards, and drink the wine thereof; they shall also make gardens, and eat the fruit of them. And I will plant them upon their land, and they shall no more be pulled up out of their land which I have given them, saith the LORD thy God.”

The profits are to go to the toilers.

That is a picture of the perfect order ultimately to be established in the world; all oppression, wrong, and fruitless toil forever done away. Thus whether we consider the charges the prophet made against the nations concerning their sin against God, or whether we look at that last chapter, we see that the aim of God’s government is that of the establishment of conditions in the midst of which it shall be possible for humanity to realize its true life, and live in the full enjoyment thereof .

That is the first permanent value of the book.

The second value is found in an examination of the practice of the Divine government as it is specially illustrated in the case of the nation of Israel.

The prophet declared: **“Hear this word that the LORD hath spoken against you, O children of Israel, against the whole family which I brought up from the land of Egypt, saying, You only have I known of all the families of the earth: therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities.”**

No people had ever had the light which had been granted to Israel. No people had ever been brought into such intimate relationship with God as they had.

The prophet moreover declared that God had definitely revealed His mind to them through the prophets, **“Surely the Lord God will do nothing, but he revealeth his secret unto his servants the prophets.”**

In these two passages Amos insisted upon the privileges of these people.

Now let us consider what he said concerning the sins of the privileged people.

When he came to deal definitely and specifically with these sins, he did so by describing the luxury and wantonness of the women. **“Hear this word, ye kine of Bashan, that are in the mountain of Samaria, which oppress the poor, which crush the needy, which say to their masters, Bring, and let us drink.”**

Isaiah in his sternest denunciation of the people recognized the same corrupting influence, and in satire more biting, and irony more bitter, denounced the sin of the women.

John Ruskin attempted to teach his age the same lesson. He declared, and it has often been smiled at as a superlative statement impossible of belief, that in the day when a sanctified and pure womanhood demands that war shall cease, war must cease. It is a superlative statement, but careful consideration will make contradiction of it very difficult.

Thus when the prophet began to deal with the sin of the privileged people, he recognized the awful as well as the sublime influence of womanhood. In his view the sin of the privileged people had its most fearful manifestation in its degraded womanhood.

He then showed that these people had sinned in that they had violated holy associations.

In a word full of irony he said, “**come to Bethel and transgress.**”

Think of what Bethel stood for, to these people, and so understand the force of his message.

He further showed that their sin had been that they had not yielded to chastisement. That is the value of the phrase running through one section of his prophecy, “**Yet have ye not returned unto Me.**”

In spite of blasting, and mildew, and all the other methods of chastisement, they had persisted in their sin.

His final word about the sin of the people was that of a denunciation of their false confidence. He spoke to two parties in Israel. First to the people who were always talking about “**the day of the Lord**” and sighing for it.

These he told that they did not know “**the day of the Lord,**” for it would be to them a day of vengeance, of punishment, of judgment.

Secondly to the people who never sighed for “**the day of the Lord,**” and were “**at ease in Zion,**” the indifferent people.

All this is the most graphic setting forth of the sins of a privileged people. We do not see such sin in all its darkness until we recognize the greatness of the privilege of the sinning people.

They were the family God had known as He had known no other. God had done nothing among them but that He had revealed His secret to the prophets. They had received immediate revelation throughout their history, yet they were guilty of the sins of wanton womanhood; of the violation of holy associations; of refusal to submit to chastisement; of professed desire for a day of judgment which would be to them a day of fire, and of tempest, and storm; and of indifference to that day.

The prophet then pronounced the judgment which would fall upon the privileged people in five visions:

- Of the locusts,
- Of the fire,
- Of the plumbline,
- Of the basket of summer fruit; and then all symbolism failing,
- Of the active Lord coming by the way of the altar of judgment.

In these visions judgment is seen determined upon, temporarily restrained, and finally executed. This message of the activity of the Divine government must have caused great astonishment to the men who listened to it.

Jeroboam was on the throne of Israel. It was a day of material prosperity in which the people were saying in effect, See how God loves us, how great is our prosperity!

Suddenly this herdsman from Tekoa appeared, and first declared that of them the Lord had said, **“You only have I known of all the families of the earth.”**

So far, in all probability, they listened to him with preeminent satisfaction. They were the privileged people. God had done everything for them.

The moment of astonishment came when the prophet continued, **“therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities.”**

Because their light had been clear, their judgment was to be profound. The measure of their privilege was the measure of their responsibility. According to their failure to respond to responsibility in the days of privilege, must be the depth of the ruin and degradation which would inevitably befall them.

Finally, as permanent value we find the promise of the Divine government.

It is specially to be noted that the phrase **“in that day,”** connects the closing promise of restoration with all that has preceded it. The day referred to is the day of judgment, the day of denunciation. **“In that day will I raise up the tabernacle of David that is fallen, and close up the breaches thereof; and I will raise up his ruins, and I will build it as in the days of old.”**

That is the promise of government.

We have seen the philosophy of it. We have seen the illustration of it in practice. In the last paragraph we find the promise of its persistence. Through all the processes we have gleams of the ultimate restoration, and at last it is definitely promised.

First preliminary restoration is promised, **“In that day will I raise up the tabernacle of David that is fallen, and close up the breaches thereof; and I will raise up his ruins, and I will build it as in the days of old.”**

Then progressive restoration is promised, **“I will bring again the captivity of my people of Israel, and they shall build the waste cities.”**

Finally permanent restoration is promised, **“I will plant them upon their land, and they shall no more be pulled up.”**

In this prophecy of Amos, then, we see the governing of God. We discover:

- His standard of government,
- His principle of government,
- His patience in government.

The practice is illustrated in the case of the people who had more light than any other nation, and gleaming through all the processes is the light of the ultimate victory.

The living message of this book is preeminently applicable to national life.

The first note is that the Lord still holds the balances of even justice, and that He is against all the things which He was against in the days of Amos.

We speak of the changes of the centuries. God never changes. We say that the old order never changes. The Divine order never changes. The Divine methods change, the Divine dispensations change, but the underlying principles of the attitude of God towards man never change. Cruelty is as hateful to God on the Congo as it was in Syria.

This book teaches secondly that the people chosen to be the depository of truth have the greatest responsibility. When we make our boast in the Divine calling of the Anglo-Saxon peoples, let us also howl for our sins, and cry aloud and spare not against our corrupting of the covenant.

The sins with which the prophet charged Israel were those of injustice, avarice, oppression, immorality, profanity, blasphemy and sacrilege; seven deadly sins. If Israel was guilty of them, so are we. Moreover, we are in danger of doing exactly what Israel did in the reign of Jeroboam.

We speak of the prosperity which God has given us. We point to the greatness of our empire as evidence of the Divine approval, and all the while God is judging us for our sins. Only as we turn from them in profound repentance can we live. God has not changed. There can be no escape from doom but by the way of penitence. We are not yet independent of God, our inventions, our policies, our armaments notwithstanding. Yet the hearts of the loyal be encouraged. Not for utter destruction does He destroy a nation. but for restoration and fulfillment of promise.

If we have made application of the message of Amos to national life, and particularly to our own nation, there is a yet closer, more searching application. There is a holy nation. The Church of Christ is in very deed an elect race. She is assuredly a royal priesthood. Most certainly she is a people for God's own possession. But she is also a holy nation. In the economy of God the Church is the Christian nation, and there is none other.

In the light of that fact the Church needs carefully to ponder the solemnity of the message of Amos. The measure of light is the measure of responsibility.

The measure in which that responsibility is not fulfilled, is the measure of the unutterable degradation which must come as God visits in judgment.

The holy nation, above all, must give no countenance to the sins which are hateful to the Lord.

Oppression, avarice, blasphemy, impurity, must not be named among the saints, because the light in which the holy nation lives is the most perfect light of all. Let her above all others rejoice in the assurance of that final victory of which she is most perfectly assured, having had through her Lord the “**more sure word of prophecy.**”

Therefore in the measure in which any of the sins denounced have power in the lives of the saints let their repentance be profound, and their return to Him Whose will is good, and perfect, and acceptable, be complete.

~ end of chapter 29 ~

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