

AMOS: JUSTICE FOR ALL
HOPE

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Amos 9:11-15

The poet Emily Dickinson begins one of her most famous poems with the beautiful image of hope. She wrote, “‘Hope’ is the thing with feathers.” Since birds have feathers we assume that she’s comparing hope to a little bird. And this bird, she writes, “perches in the soul,” and there it sings without ceasing, singing a “tune without the words.” Even when the storms of life bash this little bird, it continues to sing. No matter in what strange place you might hear this bird’s song, it will never ask for anything.

Emily Dickinson may have written that “‘Hope’ is the thing with feathers,” but as Christians, we recognize that there are in fact two different types of hope. The first type of hope is a general, non-religious view of hope. This hope is best described as ‘wishful thinking.’ Not a bad thing. We all do it. Wishful thinking is a desire for something that we may not likely ever receive. We hope for a better job, we hope for good health, we hope to win the lottery. This is what most people mean when they say they hope for something. For me, the hope is always the same. I hope that the squirrels won’t eat up all my tomatoes.

There is a second sort of hope as well—Christian hope. Christian hope is the belief in something we are certain to receive. It is an assurance concerning the future. The book of Hebrews talks about “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1). Christian hope is a belief in God’s presence in our lives. It is not a guarantee that every prayer will be answered as we may want it. It is a confidence that God watches over us today and forever. My faith is based on the hope—the conviction—that God is with me and always. I live in hope.

For many of you, after enduring eight weeks of sermons from the book of Amos, your hope is that today it will finally end. Well your prayers have been answered.

Yes, all this summer, I have been preaching from the book of Amos, starting with chapter 1 and continuing on a chapter a week until we arrive at our passage today from chapter 9. Here, we are focusing on the final five verses of this challenging book.

Amos was a farmer and shepherd who lived in the southern kingdom of Judah eight centuries before the birth of Jesus. He was called by God to venture north to the kingdom of Israel and proclaim God’s word to the people there. He dutifully complied and traveled to the capital of Israel, a city called Samaria.

Amos' principle message was directed against the wealthy and powerful of that nation who were using their position to abuse the vulnerable and to corrupt the system in order to gain profit. They bribed officials, they perverted justice, they cheated, they showed no mercy to the poor and they freely sold the indebted into debt slavery. All the while, they lived in luxury in their opulent homes, they lounged on their ivory beds, they drank wine from bowls, and washed themselves with luxurious oils. They had it good.

However, despite their sinful actions in the marketplace, these people would continue to make their pilgrimages to the holy shrines at Bethel and Gilgal to celebrate the religious feasts and festivals. At the shrines, these people would make conspicuous contributions and ostentatious offerings to God. But God was not impressed. Their gifts were offensive to God since their hearts were so far from the Lord. What God desires more than rich sacrifices is nothing less than justice.

What is justice? Justice emerges when people demonstrate care and compassion for others, when they truly love their neighbor, when they not only treat each person with respect, but fight to ensure that each person is treated with equity. Justice means there are no disposable people. Justice means that no one is viewed as less-than.

As we read earlier in Amos, God speaks to the wealthy and powerful telling them:

*I hate, I despise your festivals.
Even though you offer me your burnt-offerings and grain-offerings,
I will not accept them;
Take away from me the noise of your songs;
But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. (5:21-24)*

All that God desires from us is justice.

However, because these people have turned their backs on God, God promises judgment. The purpose of this judgment is not to punish the people, but to gain their attention so that they will turn back toward God and realign their lives. This is the reoccurring motif throughout Amos—God's call for the people to repent and return.

The final chapter of this book, chapter 9, opens with a vision. In this vision, Amos witnesses God standing on the altar in the temple. In this vision God orders that the temple shake until the roof collapses on the worshipers inside. That may sound awful to us. But it is only a vision. God is showing Amos the nature of judgment. No one shall escape God's judgment. They may dig to hell or climb into heaven. It doesn't matter. God will find them. They may hide on top of the highest mountain or swim to the bottom of the sea. God will find them. God's eyes are

always on them. This final vision is reminder that no one can escape God's judgment.

Then, finally, after nine chapters of judgment, after an entire Old Testament book, we arrive at a message offering hope. This isn't the hope of wishful thinking, this is the eternal hope of God's promise. There will come a day when God will restore the people of Israel. *On that day I will raise up the booth of David that is fallen ...and rebuild it as in the days of old.* David, of course, is the former king of Israel, chosen and anointed by God. David's booth, or house, or tent—the kingdom—has collapsed. Israel has fallen.

Have you ever been camping and had your tent collapse? You're in the tent and a line comes loose, or a stake pulls out of the dirt. Your tent ceases to be a tent and becomes a sack, with you in it.

The tent of King David—his kingdom—has collapsed, but God promises to restore it. That is God's offering—restoration of God's people, returning them to a life of joy. We see this so beautifully described in the final three verses of this book. Here, Amos presents a picture of a creator conquering death—showing us a world filled with God's abundance and goodness. In this land, *the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it*, the broken cities shall be rebuilt, and the inhabitants shall construct houses and live in them. They will plant gardens and vineyards and enjoy their fruits. This land may be the physical land of Israel, or it may be the souls of God's people. Either way, God promises restoration and a new life.

What Amos is describing here is security. In Amos' day, a person could invest their money and effort in purchasing land, building a house, and planting fields, only to have an army from a foreign land march in and take it away. Security means never having to worry about that. Security means building your house and knowing that you can live in it forever. And that is hope, the blessed assurance of something to come. All we have to do is listen with faith to God.

What God offers here is not a land or a place, but a kingdom—God's kingdom. God offers the hope that we will inhabit that kingdom and be securely rooted there. Nothing can remove us. As we read in the final verse, *I will plant them upon their land, and they shall never again be plucked up out of the land that I have given them.* This is God's gift of hope, that his people will find their forever home in his holy kingdom.

For us as Christians, Israel is not a location, but it is a place where we can gather in God's name to be God's people. It is God's kingdom. It is of this earth and yet beyond it. It is a vision that calls us forward. It is an address where we can hang our hat. Because of our belief in God, we have hope in the kingdom, a hope that lasts for eternity. We see this hope this very day as a child is brought for baptism.

His parents present him to God confident in the hope that God will always be with him.

As we close out this life-changing journey through the book of Amos, let us never forget his demanding and challenging words. May we be awed by God's powerful judgment. May we be reassured in God's promise of hope.

“Hope” is the thing with feathers -
That perches in the soul -
And sings the tune without the words -
And never stops - at all -