

Amos Chapter 7 v 1 - Chapter 8 v 10

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[0 : 00] Good evening everyone, good to be here.

The psalmist, Psalm 97, says these words. The Lord reigns, let the earth be glad, let the distant shores rejoice.

Clouds and thick darkness surround him. Righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne. Fire goes before him and consumes his foes on every side. His lightning lights up the world, the earth sees and trembles.

The mountains melt like wax before the Lord, before the Lord of all the earth. The heavens proclaim his righteousness and all peoples see his glory. Moving on to verse 10.

Let those who love the Lord hate evil, for he guards the lives of his faithful ones and delivers them from the hand of the wicked. Light shines on the righteous and joy on the upright in heart.

[1 : 02] Rejoice in the Lord, you who are righteous and praise his holy name. Well, we worship a king, don't we?

The Bible says that the Lord reigns. And whatever we think of the situation of the nation and those in power, those in politics, we can rejoice that the Lord is the true king and he is sovereign over all.

And we're told to rejoice because he's a just and he's a fair God. Righteousness and justice are the foundations of his throne. So we can rejoice in that.

Well, the first hymn we're going to sing this morning, this evening rather, speaks of Jesus reigning. It's number 310. Jesus shall reign where'er the sun.

Does his successive journeys run? Number 310. Let's sing. Well, let's continue to worship God by praying, shall we?

[2 : 05] Let's pray. Father, we thank you for the truth that you are the one who reigns.

You are the one who is on the throne. You are the one who is sovereign. And whatever is going on in the world, ultimately nothing happens without your hand upon it.

That you are using all things for good. And you are in control. We thank you. As we heard this morning that our hope, we're reminded so hopefully that our hope is in you.

And our hope is that Jesus will come again and he will bring peace to the earth. He will reign forever. And we will rise with him.

We will be resurrected one day. And that is our hope. We pray this evening that you would again strengthen us. You would again speak to us. And you would again remind us of who you are.

[3 : 08] We pray that you would open our eyes. That we've read in the psalm that you are shrouded in thick darkness. Yet we thank you that there are so many aspects of you that cannot be known.

Yet you have revealed yourself to us through your word. And through your son. So we pray this evening that you would give us hearts that are ready to hear from you. We pray that your spirit would speak to us.

We pray that you would reveal some of your majesty, some of your glory to us. And allow us to worship you again. Allow us to worship you with the right hearts.

And to hear from you. So speak to us we pray. Amen. Well we turn to our passage. Which is in Amos. Amos chapter 7.

Which will be page 922 in your Bibles. Amos chapter 7. And we're looking at the first nine verses. So Amos chapter 7 starting in verse 1.

[4 : 21] This is what the sovereign Lord showed me. He was preparing swarms of locusts after the king's share had been harvested. And just as the lake crops were coming up. When they had stripped the land clean.

I cried out. Sovereign Lord forgive. How can Jacob survive? He is so small. So the Lord relented. This will not happen. This will not happen.

The Lord said. This is what the sovereign Lord showed me. The sovereign Lord was calling for judgment by fire. It dried up the great deep and devoured the land. Then I cried out.

Sovereign Lord I beg you. Stop. How can Jacob survive? He is so small. So the Lord relented. This will not happen either. The sovereign Lord said. This is what he showed me.

The Lord was standing by a wall that had been built true to plum. With a plum line in his hand. And the Lord asked me. What do you see Amos? A plum line I replied.

[5 : 19] Then the Lord said. Look. I am setting a plum line among my people Israel. I will spare them no longer. The high places of Isaac will be destroyed. And the sanctuaries of Israel will be ruined.

With my sword I will rise against the house of Jeroboam. So this evening I'm going to speak on Amos 7.

And maybe run into Amos 8 as well. We'll see how we go for time. And my title is Selling Our Birthright. Selling Our Birthright. Some of you will know the late boxer Muhammad Ali.

Muhammad Ali was called Cassius Clay until he became a Muslim and changed his name to Muhammad Ali. But he was a man who wasn't known for his humility. He was world boxing heavyweight champion for a long time in the 1970s I think.

But one day he was on an aeroplane. And the stewardess was just going along the aisle. Checking that everybody had their seatbelt on. And she said to him. Mr. Ali do you think you could just put your seatbelt on?

[6 : 45] And he said. Superman don't need no seatbelt. And he said. So she. Quick as anything she said. Superman don't need no aeroplane.

Which is very clever. Now what we come to this evening. Is a nation who'd lost any sense of their humility before God.

But when we come to this book of Amos. As you do with any part of the Bible. It's important to think. Where does this story fit in? In the sweep of redemptive history.

Where does Amos fit in with the sweep of redemptive history now? So I'm going to try to tell you in a few sentences. Where Amos fits in. And I'm painting with a huge brush. This is not detail.

But the Old Testament of course begins with creation. Where you have this perfect world. And then the world is wrecked by the fall. By human sin. And rebellion against God.

[7 : 47] And right at the beginning God promises a deliverer doesn't he? He promises somebody who will be. Who will come and crush the head of the serpent. I've lived in Africa. I've seen lots of snakes. You want to kill a snake.

You have to crush its head. Somebody's going to come. A serpent crusher. Who will destroy the power of Satan. And the whole of the Old Testament is the looking forward to the coming of that man.

Who we know to be the son of God. So how did it happen? Well God could have parachuted his son into the world. Kind of from heaven. But he didn't.

Instead he raised up a nation. Who were the descendants of one man, Abraham. And through Abraham's greatest son.

He promised to crush the head of the serpent. To bring blessing to the world. So you know the story. Abraham had Isaac. Who had Jacob. Who had 12 sons.

[8 : 42] Who became 12 tribes. And then you had stories like Joseph. We talked about this morning. Then you had the descendants of Jacob.

All ending up in Egypt. In slavery for 400 years. And then they come out in the Exodus. You have the wilderness wanderings. And then you have. They come across the Jordan. You have settlement. And the time of the judges.

And then the people crave for a king. A human king. And God gives them one. And they got Saul. Saul. And then they got David. And then they got Solomon. This is a quick.

Train ride through the Old Testament. But after Solomon. The third king. The nation of Israel split into two. It's very sad really. But that's what happened about 930 BC.

Into two kingdoms. And you have the northern kingdom. With ten tribes. That we call Israel. Or Ephraim. And in the south. The southern kingdom of two tribes. Judah and Benjamin.

[9 : 41] And we're thinking particularly. About the northern kingdom this evening. The northern kingdom was led by a man. Called Jeroboam. And when he broke away from. From the. Tribe of Judah.

And also Benjamin. He broke away from Jerusalem. Where the temple was. That Solomon had built. And so he set up an alternative system. Of worship in the north. Two places for.

For religious worship. With a new god system. Bethel and Dan. In the north. And he had these golden calves made. And he said to the people.

Here are your gods. Who brought you out of Egypt. He wanted the people to go and worship. These golden calves. That were deep in the people's psyche. They kind of come from Egypt. I think. The idea of golden calves.

And he. Jeroboam wanted to avoid. The. He wanted to avoid the people. Going. To the south. To Jerusalem. Because he thought it would take their loyalty.

[10 : 38] Away from him. Who was the king in the north. So the northern kingdom. Had this idolatrous system. In. For about 200 years.

And during those 200 years. It never had a good king. There were some good kings in the south. That the north never had a good king. And it was a nation awash with. Wickedness and idolatry. The kings set the tone for the whole nation.

But still in those 200 years. God spoke to them. He sent them prophets. To remind them of the covenant. He had established with their forefathers. And he warned them again and again.

Of pending judgment. If they didn't change their ways. And that there would be enormous blessings. If they did change their ways. So he sent them. Elijah. And Elisha.

Abadiah. Obadiah. And Amos. And then eventually. Hosea. So Amos was the penultimate. The last but one prophet.

[11 : 35] Who was sent to the northern kingdom. Before they were obliterated. By the Assyrians. In 722 BC. Amos was a shepherd from Judah.

So he came from the southern kingdom. And was sent to the north. Shepherds were kind of the lowest. Of the hierarchy. In this kind of society. And he's hardly the kind of man.

Who you think will be qualified. To be a prophet. Especially when he went to the. And spoke to the elite. Of the northern kingdom. The leaders of the nation. I was thinking about how you'd.

Try to quantify that today. It'd be a bit like. A car mechanic. From Belfast. Going to London. To speak to the. Metropolitan elite of London.

To rebuke them. That's what it was a bit like. A shepherd going from the south. To speak to the leaders. Of the northern kingdom. And so Amos spoke. The word of God. To the leaders of the northern kingdom. But he wasn't listened to.

[12 : 33] And within 35 to 40 years. Of Amos arriving. The northern kingdom was. Destroyed by the Assyrians. The 10 tribes. Were lost forever. And people are still looking for them.

Today. So more than 7 centuries. Would pass. Before God's champion. The serpent crusher. Would actually come. Into the world. Jesus Christ.

Who would pay the penalty for. Our sins. But that was 7 centuries later. So my first. Kind of subheading is. Judgment halted. This is verses 1 to 7. We've read this already.

So I'm not going to reread it. But what you have is. Amos speaking to the nation. And he explains. That there are two. Judgments to come.

That God is planning for Israel. One of the judgments is locusts. And one of them is fire. And what happens is that Amos prays. And God relents. Now you might.

[13 : 29] You might just miss it. When you're. Working your way through the book of Amos. But it's very significant. That God relents. When Amos prays. For the nation. Do you remember.

Jonah. Now Jonah was a prophet. Almost a contemporary of Amos. And Jonah was sent to the Assyrians. To the Ninevites. And they were Gentiles. And they were the enemy of. Of Israel. But still.

Jonah. When he went to preach to the Ninevites. They repented. Didn't they? And God relented of his judgment. And. And Jonah was not pleased. Was he. In fact he was really angry. Because he wanted them destroyed.

He was furious with what happened. He wanted them dead. But there's some. There's an enormous contrast here with Amos. I know that. They were his own people. In one sense. But he was. He was so.

What you see here is Amos. Interceding for his nation. He says. Sovereign Lord. I beg you. Stop. How can Jacob survive? Jacob being the northern kingdom. He is so small. And what you see is Amos.

[14 : 27] Who's filled with compassion. For his. For the people. And you see the heart of a true prophet. You see the heart of an evangelist. Today. Or any believer.

For that matter. Living in a nation. That is increasingly rejecting God. Like ours is. You see. A man who is pleading with God. On the people's behalf.

And Amos. He strikes you as a man. Who is very sensitive. To the plight of the people. That he's among. So he prays. And God relents. And there's a lesson for us here.

And the lesson is this. Human significance. As we pray before God. Intercession. You know. One person. Is heard by God.

It's an amazing story. Of human significance. In the face of. Of the. The wheel of. Historical events. That are turning. What we might call them.

- [15 : 23] Geopolitical. Maneuvers. That here is a man who prays. And God hears his prayer. And he answers him. And the encouragement. Is for us to intercede. For our lost land.
- Today. We live in a society. That is. Increasingly dysfunctional. Increasingly diseased. And has this moral collapse. About it. You can smell. A sense of decay.
- In our land. And God calls us. To be intercessors. For our nation. And to. Not. Despise. The people. That we live among. Who may want to destroy.
- Our Christian heritage. All that is our. Judeo-Christian past. But actually to love people. And to pray for them. Just like Amos did. You know. You can change the world. Through intercession. That's the lesson of this.
- That remarkable ministry. Of intercession. It's a ministry. Which is available to all. You know. Where I. Preach often in Liverpool. About a third of the congregation. Are probably over 75.
- [16 : 19] And sometimes they. I think they wonder. What they're doing. With their lives. And I say to them. You be an intercessor. For your nation. Be an intercessor. For missionaries. Be an intercession. For the world. With your time.
- There is a great calling. On all of us. At all stages of our life. Especially when you've got time. To be an intercessor. I think when God's. History books are opened.
- That there will be. All sorts of people. Whose significance. Will come to light. That are never mentioned. In our secular history books. Today. There will be people. Who change the world. On their knees.
- So this is a great. Encouragement. To be an intercessor. There's a church. I go and speak at. In Reading sometimes. And when you go into the building.
- They have this stone. Set into the wall. Of the church building. And it says. A house of prayer. For all nations. Which is that inscription. On Solomon's temple. A house of prayer.
- [17 : 14] For all nations. Isn't that a wonderful. Thing. To aspire to be. That the people of God. Should be a house of prayer. For all nations. And then we come to this. Plumb line. This is verses.
- Seven to nine. Shall I read it? This is what he showed me. The Lord was standing by a wall. That had been built true to plumb. With a plumb line in his hand. And the Lord asked me. What do you see Amos? A plumb line.
- I replied. Then the Lord said. Look I am setting a plumb line. Against my people Israel. I will spare them no longer. The high places of Isaac. Will be destroyed. And the sanctuaries of Israel. Will be ruined. With my sword.
- I will rise. Against the house of Jeroboam. What you have here. In these verses. Is a kind of trial. So God.
- Kind of puts. Israel into the dock. At this trial. And he measures them with a plumb line. You know what a plumb line is? It's a. It's a piece of string. With a heavy.
- [18 : 10] Little object on the end. It would have been. Possibly made of clay in those days. The end. The thing that you hung on it. And when you hang it up. The first time I preached on this passage.
- I brought one with me. But I forgot to bring one this time. You hang it up. And the line is vertical. Because of gravity. This. This perfect line. It tests whether a wall is true. When you put it against it.
- I remember. Many years ago. I used to decorate people's houses. For a living. And I was. Invited to go and decorate somebody's house. In South Yorkshire. It was an old miner's cottage. When you looked at the walls.

They looked pretty. Straight. To the human eye. But as soon as you put the plumb line on them. It was incredible. They were completely. Out of kilter. So you had to. Think about how you got the wallpaper on.

To fit into a bent crooked corner. And in Amos's vision. The Lord hangs this plumb line. Against the house of Israel.

[19 : 08] Now the house of Israel. That metaphor that's used all the time. For Israel being a house. The house of the Lord. It was a building. The house of Israel was a building. That was set up to be true. Built on a solid foundation of covenant and law.

But it was now leaning. And about to fall to the ground. And you know God's plumb line can be a huge shock. Because we human beings are brilliant at all sorts of things. But we are not very good.

At assessing ourselves. We are prone to self-deception aren't we? In our lives. And often we need an external audit. About where we're up to. And that was what was happening to this nation.

In the northern kingdom. It was out of terms with the covenant. It was radically out of truth. And the thing that's alerted to here. That God condemns them for. As is so often the case in the prophets.

Is their idolatry. And it's that. That God. Accuses them of. And it's because of their idolatry. That they're going to face judgment.

[20 : 06] And be destroyed. The high places of Isaac will be destroyed. And the sanctuaries of Israel will be ruined. You know the thing about idolatry is. Any kind of idolatry.

Is that it puts you out of line with what is true. Idolatry has got this ability to distort your view of reality. See. So when you go home later tonight.

Try to imagine what the Lord would say. If he set a plumb line against our nation. And then remember that he does. Chapters 2 and 3 I think of Amos. Are God's accusation against the nations.

God is the Lord of all creation. Of course the people of Israel were his special people. In these times. But he also brought his charges against all the nations. And he does today. Read Romans chapter 1.

So God sets his plumb line. And we'll think a little bit about that in a minute. But then you have this narrative interlude. That's my next heading.

[21 : 01] A narrative interlude. It's the only bit of narrative in the book of Amos. This is verses 10 to 17. The rest of the book is prophecy.

It's diagnosis and condemnation. And some wonderful promises that you find later on. But here is some narrative. I'm just going to read it to you then. Amaziah verse 10. The priest of Bethel sent a message to Jeroboam king of Israel.

Amos is rising a conspiracy against you at the very heart of Israel. The land cannot bear all his words. For this is what Amos is saying. Jeroboam will die by the sword. And Israel will surely go into exile away from their native land.

Then Amaziah said to Amos. Get out you seer. Go back to the land of Judah. Earn your bread there and do your prophesying there. Don't prophesy anymore at Bethel. Because this is the king's sanctuary.

And the temple of the kingdom. Amos answered Amaziah. I was neither a prophet nor a prophet's son. But I was a shepherd. And I also took care of the sycamore fig trees. But the Lord took me from tending the flock.

[22 : 06] And said to me. Go prophesy to my people Israel. Now then hear the word of the Lord. You say do not prophesy against Israel. And stop preaching against the house of Isaac.

And it goes on. So what's going on in this bit of narrative? Well here we have one of those. We have a priest of one of those two centers of idolatry in the northern kingdom. Either Bethel or Dan.

Bethel I think. And this guy's called Amaziah. Amaziah. And this priest. Is a prophet in this idolatrous system. And he goes to the king.

To complain about Amos. Because it's come to his attention. Amos has been saying all these terrible things about the king. That he's going to die. And the nation is going to be taken into captivity.

And the whole tone of Amaziah's complaint. Is that this is treason. It's conspiracy against the nation. Here's a man who's saying the king is going to die. And the nation is going to be destroyed. Now of course ironically Amos has just saved the nation through his intercessions.

[23 : 05] But in their world of denial they don't know that. And so they demand that Amos goes home to Judah. Earn your bread somewhere else. Not here. This is the king's sanctuary. Notice it's not Yahweh's sanctuary.

It's the king's sanctuary. But you know in wanting this prophet Amos to go home. They're revealing just how far they are from God's plumb line. Plumb line because they've got no interest in hearing the word of the Lord.

Which is coming through Amos. You know that the king and Amaziah. Their whole way of computing the world and success and failure was just incorrect.

They were so close to judgment. And they thought that everything was just okay. Just all right. A bit like we might say about the West today. So close to judgment perhaps. And yet so smug in its self-righteousness.

Now it's interesting when you see Amos' reply to the priest. It's very interesting because he's highly combative. You know Amos is a man who's been called by Almighty God. And this man Amaziah thinks he ought to be quiet.

[24 : 11] It's like Amos is saying who do you think you are telling me to be quiet. I'm being commissioned by God. I wasn't a professional prophet like the professional prophets in this land are. Who just prophesy whatever the king wants to hear.

I was a man who was a shepherd. I was called to be a prophet to speak the word of the Lord. He wants this man to know he was a real prophet. And Amos stands there and pronounces judgment on Amaziah.

In verse 17 it's shocking stuff really. This is what the Lord says. Your wife will become a prostitute in the city. The Bible has some shocking parts to it.

And your sons and daughters will fall by the sword. Your land will be measured and divided up. And you yourself will die in a pagan country. And Israel will certainly go into exile away from their native land.

Here's a man who is fearless. He might be sensitive. He loves his people. That he's come to speak to. But he's willing to confront them with the truth that God has given him.

[25 : 16] So what's the lesson? Well what you see here in Amos is what I've called godly belligerence. Is there such a thing as godly belligerence? It's a refusal to be buoyed or intimidated in the face of idolatry and evil in the land.

You know you and I live in a nation that is embracing sin at a rate of knots. On so many fronts. And increasingly our nation is mocking righteousness and calling evil good and good evil.

And our reaction needs to be one of love and compassion. But there needs to be a note of belligerence in it. Do you remember what Pharaoh said to Moses all those years before?

Well Pharaoh said to Moses I do not know the Lord. Who is the Lord that I should obey him? And we live at a time when there are lots of people around like Pharaoh. There's a kind of cockiness and a contempt when Christian people tell those in our society that they are accountable to him.

That in his world our creator and God he demands our allegiance. But the lesson of this passage and what follows with judgment that comes.

[26 : 27] Indeed the message of the whole Bible is that you can never take God on and win. You always lose like Pharaoh did. And many others in the Bible. Now of course you can ignore God for a while.

But the day will come when he will have you in his court. And there will be no escape. He will have you to account for your life. When I was a student many years ago.

I remember this guy came and took a mission at our university. And he said he spoke. He was speaking to an awful lot of non-Christians. And he said there's going to come a day when you're going to stand before God.

And there's going to be the whole world present. I'm not sure whether he knows this. He's kind of making a point rather than being necessarily accurate. But he said there's going to be the whole world present. And you're going to be there standing before God.

And God is going to show a film of the whole of your life in front of everybody. That's how God is going to judge you. I don't know whether God is going to judge us like that. But it was just to shock people.

[27 : 25] Fortunately if you trust in Jesus Christ. The life that will be shown is the life of Christ. Because he's obeyed when we never did hasn't he? His life is our life. And he obeyed when we never did.

He died the death that we never could. But there is no escape from God's judgment. God's justice. You can't escape God by just not believing in him.

Sometimes I talk to people and they say, oh I don't believe in God. As if not believing in him means that they can escape his justice. You see God exists whether you believe in him or not. And you can't vote God out of office as judge.

Just because he's the kind of judge that you don't want him to be. And the freedom to do whatever you want to do can never overrule God's freedom to arrest you one day.

Or any day for that matter and have you in his court. And Amos knew that he was a man sent from God. He was commissioned from God to warn the people. And he didn't care about the king's reaction.

[28 : 23] And I think that's important isn't it? We remember that. There is such arrogance in our land against the gospel. We mustn't be intimidated by the reactions of people in the face of the gospel.

And then we come to chapter 8. And it's the next vision that you have in our passage. And I've entitled it Summer Fruit. Let's just read this together.

This is what the Sovereign Lord says. Chapter 8 verse 1. This is what the Sovereign Lord says. So he showed me. A basket of ripe fruit. I think it literally means, it literally reads summer fruit.

I'm using the 1984 NIV. What do you see Amos? He asked. A basket of ripe fruit, I answered. Then the Lord said to me.

The time is ripe for my people Israel. I will spare them no longer. In that day, declares the Sovereign Lord. The songs in the temple will turn to waning. Many, many bodies flung everywhere.

[29 : 28] Silence. In 1918, my maternal grandfather came back from World War I.

And he was damaged. He wasn't damaged in his body, but he was damaged in his mind. You can be as damaged, as much damaged in your mind by war as you can in your body. And it affected my grandfather all his life, what he'd seen in the First World War, especially at Gallipoli, where he was.

Once he showed me an old black and white photograph of the final leaving year of his school. I think he left school in 1914.

And there were 40 boys in his leaving class. And he picked out himself and another boy. And he said all the rest were killed between 1914 and 1918. All 38 of them.

He survived. That's why I'm here, I guess. Well, obviously. But after the war, my grandfather bought... He bought a house with a large piece of land at the back in Leeds.

[30 : 32] And on that land, he planted an orchard of apple and pear trees and some plum trees. And it was after I'd grown up and my grandfather had long since died that I realised that buying that land and planting that orchard was a form of therapy for him.

It was a way of coping with his terrible memories. You know, the human brain can store a billion images, but it can't forget any of them. And the bad ones get so burned into our consciousness, we can't get them out.

And he lived with all of these memories of things that he'd seen. And I think this building of this orchard was a form of therapy for him. So my granddad grew his fruit. But, you know, that fruit in time, so, I don't know, 50 years later, the fruit that he used to, that grew in his garden, it became a burden in the end.

Because there was so much of it. So every autumn, my family, my father and mother and my two siblings, we made a trip to his house in Leeds. And we went to harvest the fruit from his trees.

And being my grandparents were the First World War generation, my parents were the Second World War generation. They were children during the Second World War. They didn't want to waste anything. So every single apple and pear was carefully wrapped in newspaper and stored in boxes.

[31 : 55] And all the other stuff was turned into stewed fruit. So my grandmother spent three months before Christmas stewing all these pears. And then she tried to find a hundred homes to deliver this stuff to.

So we used to bring back car, bootfuls of it. But the point is that it was autumn fruit. And autumn fruit keeps. In fact, when my grandparents died, we found boxes of apples in their loft and in their spare room.

All these apples all wrapped up in newspaper from years before. But autumn fruit keeps. But the fruit in our passage is specifically called summer fruit.

So think of strawberries and raspberries. Even in a fridge with modern refrigeration, they go bad pretty quickly, don't they? When you buy them from Tesco or Sainsbury's, they go bad pretty quickly.

And God likens the nation of Israel to summer fruit. The point is that they're not going to be around for very much longer. They are a nation ripe for judgment. And then in verses 47, we get some reasons why God has earmarked them for judgment.

[33 : 03] These are some of the most famous verses in the Bible about social justice. And I think Martin Luther King's speech included many of these words, didn't he?

That famous speech he made. Hear this, you who trample the needy and do away with the poor of the land, saying, When will the new moon be over, that we may sell grain, and the Sabbath be ended, that we may market wheat?

Skimping the measure, boosting the price, and cheating with dishonest scales, buying the poor with silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals, selling even the sweepings with the wheat.

The Lord has sworn by the pride of Jacob, I will never forget anything they have done. So, these are God's words of judgment upon them. So what were they doing that was so outraging?

Outraging the Lord. Well, the rich and the powerful of the land were trampling the poor and the needy. You know, so often in the Old Testament, or in any society for that matter, the measure of how well the nation was doing was seen in how it treated, not the well-off, but the poor.

[34 : 08] The well-off, the rich can always look after themselves, can't they? But how you treat the poor was the measure of how successful they were as a nation in God's sight.

Now, I think it's very hard for us to understand issues of social injustice. Living in this country, there are issues of social injustice, but it's when you go abroad you see real issues of social injustice.

I lived in Uganda for three years, and I went to the north of the country on a preaching trip once, and I realised how soft I was.

Going out of Kampala, where there's water and there's electricity. Electricity is off about half the time, but we had an inverter to give us battery power, and we had our own well so we could get water. And we had a safe room to go to when it was dangerous to lock ourselves in.

And, you know, we had a bit of green, so it wasn't too difficult. But going to the north of Uganda was, well, it was tough for me. I found out what a softie I was. My room was full of bedbugs and mosquitoes.

[35 : 11] And they bit me all night. Within about 24 hours, I got this terrible stomach, and I was in the bathroom for about three days non-stop. I realised just how soft being brought up in the West had made me, being in a tough environment.

But at one time I was with some of these men from the church where I'd gone to minister, and they told me that in this part of northern Uganda, they grew something that they call sim-sim, which I think is sesame seed.

Well, it becomes sesame seed oil. And the previous year they'd had this enormous bumper harvest of this stuff, the sim-sim, as they termed it.

And one of them, one of these farmers, went to Nairobi in Kenya, and he negotiated a deal with a Chinese businessman to supply as much sim-sim as they could possibly supply for 25 US dollars for a five-kilo bundle.

And they were delighted about this because these people were staggeringly poor. It's very hard to imagine how poor they are with us living in a prosperous society like we do in England. These people were incredibly poor.

[36 : 18] And many of them would not be able to find 50 pence to buy the drugs necessary to save their child's life from malaria. That's how poor they were. And so they had this bumper harvest, and they were hoping that this would give them some money and allow them to invest in their farms for the future.

Anyway, they had this deal with this businessman, and before they could supply him, they had to go to Kampala, the capital, and get an export licence.

And when they got to the Ministry of Export, whatever it was, they were told that there's only one person in Uganda who has the right to export sim-sim abroad.

And when they inquired who it was, they found out it was the daughter of the president, the first daughter. So they wrote to her and asked for an audience with her. And eventually that was granted, and they went to see her and said, you know, we want to export sim-sim abroad, and we need your permission to do so because the law didn't allow anybody else to export.

And she said, well, I can't let you do that because I'm the only one who is allowed to export. But I tell you what, rather than you get \$25 for every five kilos, I will give you \$3 for every kilo.

[37 : 35] And they said, forget it. And they went back to the north of Uganda and were generally enormously disheartened at the injustice of the whole system that was set up just to benefit the privileged few, which is how a lot of Sub-Saharan Africa functions.

A few people gain, and the policies, you keep everybody else poor because poor people can be controlled more easily because they're too busy trying to survive. That's how it all works, how the system works. And all of their sim-sim just started to rot.

And then the first daughter, the president's daughter, sent an agent up to see them and said, my boss has decided to be very kind to you.

She's going to give you \$2 for every five kilo bundle. And they were so desperately sold to her, and then she exported to China and made a fortune. But can you see the injustice of these kind of situations?

This is the kind of thing that they were facing here in the nation, the northern kingdom. This injustice towards the poor. And it was going hand in hand with their observation of these religious festivals was their Sabbath-keeping.

[38 : 45] God holds them to account for their Sabbath-keeping. There was enormous hypocrisy. It was as though, this is what the accusations against them, the leaders of the nation were, and the businessmen and women, was that they couldn't wait to get to the end of the Sabbath, because then they could get back to cheating the poor through their deceitful practices.

And then there was slavery in the nation as well. And we would call this debt slavery. So for a debt that was owed to a moneylender, that was so small that you could buy a pair of sandals with it, the poor were being sold into slavery.

You see, the point is that the religion in Israel had been reduced to outward practices, and they'd forgotten that the whole point of the Sabbath was, that the Sabbath was supposed to be tied in to a whole attitude of heart that was involved in loving God and loving your neighbour.

And they'd forgotten all that. All that mattered was what was outward. So there was an emptiness, a meaninglessness of everything. And you can hear the outrage that God, in verse 8, in God's pronouncements of judgment, will not the land tremble for this?

And all who live in it mourn, the whole land will rise like the Nile, it will be stirred and then sink like the river of Egypt. In that day declares the Sovereign Lord, I will make the sun go down at noon and darken the earth in broad daylight.

[40 : 04] All the things that were there, beacons of normality were going to be changed. I will turn your religious feasts into mourning and all your singing into weeping. I will make all of you wear sackcloth and shave your heads.

I will make that time like mourning for an only son at the end of a bitter day. So the northern kingdom were ripe fruit and their days were numbered. Now, what do we say in application?

Well, there's lots of things you could say as we think about how you apply the Bible to the times that we live in. On these particular points, let me give you two things. The first one is that we need to remember in our day and generation that God is a God who judges wickedness.

And that's not particularly my theme this evening, but we note it in passing that God is not almighty. He is almighty. He's not only love. His love is a holy love.

He's a God of justice and righteousness. And one day he will have every single human being in his court. We need to remember that. We're going to sing in a few minutes. Thy justice like mountains towering above.

[41 : 13] You know that line? In that hymn? Thy justice like mountains. If you've ever thought about the justice of God, if you've ever, I remember standing at the foot of the Eiger in Switzerland.

You know that rock face that so many people have died on trying to climb it. And it towers above you. The justice of God is like that. It's like that. Immovable. The justice of God. That God has to punish all sin because he's a holy God.

And nothing escapes him. He cannot allow anything to pass. All sin will be judged. And we thank God that he judged his son in our place. Otherwise, we don't have a hope.

But you know, we Christians living at a time like this, in a sentimental age, need to remember both the goodness and the severity of God. And many churches only proclaim the goodness of God because they want to keep people in their midst.

They don't want to offend people. But it's only when we appreciate the severity of God that the cross of Christ will have any significance and meaning for us. But you know, there's a deeper point to note here.

[42 : 24] You know, what we see here is a nation that is awash with wickedness. And the reason for that wickedness is idolatry. And it's always that way.

You know, in the end, what determines your actions? Is what you worship. So if you worship the living God who is loving, compassionate, just and true, then in the end, your life will be characterized by those things, love and compassion and justice and truth.

But if you worship an idol, then you tend to become like your idol. You assume the characteristics of that idol. So that means that if you want to understand any culture that you find yourself in, you've got to work out what does it deify?

What does it make into its God? In other words, you have to work out what does that society give divine status to? What's the God of that land? What does it worship? So here in the Northern Kingdom, it was some kind of pagan deity that they worshipped.

In some cultures, like the Aztecs, they worshipped the sun, didn't they? Or was it the moon? The sun, I think. Some cultures worshipped the moon. In others, like when I was in sub-Zone Africa, lots of people worshipped the spirits of their ancestors.

[43 : 41] We call that animism. In other nations, it's the nation-state, like in Nazi Germany. They worshipped the nation-state. But in the West that we live in today, what do we worship?

Well, let me suggest to you that it is the self. It's me. I worship myself. My needs, my preferences, my rights, they are everything. And I create reality according to my preferences.

Every cause must be made to serve the idol of me and my needs. And if you think, when you understand that, that explains, the worship of the self explains so much of the wickedness that we find in our land.

So let me give you an example. A few months ago, I went to a lecture on abortion in a church in Liverpool. and it was a very disturbing lecture.

We were given, we were shown videos of just how developed a six-week-old baby is. Just six weeks old. As well as we were shown pictures of dismembered babies who'd been aborted and also babies being aborted.

[44 : 46] I had to shut my eyes. I couldn't watch it. It was so disturbing. But the point of this lecture was that if we persuade people in our nation that this baby in the womb or this fetus in the womb, as some people would say, is really a person and we will change our nation's view of abortion.

All we have to do is persuade them. This is a life. This is a real human being. But you know, for me there was something important that wasn't mentioned and it's this, that what you worship determines how you think and to justify that worship then everything else must be bent to serve your worship.

So in the West today, where we worship the self, our preferences and our entitlements are everything and nothing must be allowed to diminish our rights.

That explains, you know, why we abort 200,000 babies every year in this country. because even a human life mustn't get in the way of your preferences, your right to sexual freedom, your right to financial independence, your right to two holidays a year, your right to careers uninterrupted by the concerns of fatherhood and motherhood when you've got other plans, things that you'd like to attend to.

And so, conveniently, we say that a baby in the room, really, that's how we think, has only got value if you want it. That's become the criteria.

[46 : 15] If you want it, it's got value. If you don't want it, it has no value really. But you see, we're worshipping at the shrine of the self. And that's why in the end, telling people that abortion is wrong or that this is really life will never fix the issue.

Lots of people who support abortion will say, yeah, of course it's a lie. They don't care. There are bigger priorities than that. And you see, the priority is our needs, our rights, our preferences.

You see, that's what we worship. It's ourselves. What you worship determines your behaviour, how you live, how you think. So what, the only thing that will fix something like abortion, and you could apply this to so many issues, is calling our nation back to God.

I'm not saying we shouldn't oppose abortion. Goodness me, we should. But what we should do is call people back to worshipping the God who loves and values the orphan and the widow and the unborn, so much so that he sent his son to die for them.

But you know, the point here, you know, when I think about how this nation treats the unborn, it is mind-blowing, the contempt with which we treat the unborn, considering how we ascribe rights to so many other people or try to do.

[47 : 34] I tremble when I think about how we treat the unborn in our land because I know that God is a God who judges wicked nations and we are overripe for judgment.

You know, Ronald Reagan, the American president 1980 to 1988, he said, one thing I've noticed in life is that all those who favor abortion have already been born.

Isn't that clever? Very clever. Now, just in case you're thinking I'm picking on one theme that Christians are obsessed about, you hear that a lot, don't you? Christians are obsessed about abortion. You know, we could talk about the arms trade and the way that Britain sells arms to all sorts of nations around the world that are highly dubious and use their weapons in all sorts of terrible ways just to boost our financial lucrative contracts that we have as a nation and boost our wealth, add to the value of our shares, the footsie, the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil.

I'm not against making weapons, but it's who we sell them to and we sell nations, weapons of all sorts of nations. During the Iraq-Iran war of the 1980s, Britain sold weapons to both sides to slaughter each other.

It was a kind of contempt for human life. And so, you know, if the right are accused of condemning abortion, we need to join the left as well in condemning some aspects of the arms trade.

[49 : 07] The point is that idolatry is behind the arms trade as well because it's the love of money. But the point is that our nation, I'm going to finish in a minute, the point is that our nation is worshipping at the wrong altar.

And until you understand that about our nation, you'll never understand it. It's our worship that determines how we are acting. So we must never be duped into thinking that there are some people who are religious and some people aren't.

Some people who are people of faith and some people who aren't people of faith. People without faith, yeah, they don't do it all the time. People of faith and people of none. You know, whenever we think like that, then we've already conceded away our powers of discernment.

Everybody worships. It's just what you worship because we were made to worship. We were made to have an object of worship. And if you don't worship the living God, you worship an idol. G.K. Chesterton said when people don't worship God, it's not that they don't worship, it's not that they worship nothing.

It's far worse than that. They worship anything. So we must be very careful that we say some people are religious and some people are not. Some people are people of faith and some people are not. We've conceded away something when we say that because actually the heart for everybody, the key to understanding everybody in every nation is what we worship because we're made to love God.

[50 : 21] If you don't love God, you just love something else. Let me just read you a few things.

There was a national day of prayer. I will really finish on this. There was a national day of prayer in America 2017 and Billy Graham's daughter and Graham Lotz led these prayers.

And some of them were really fascinating. It was a day of repentance for the sins of America. And we're no different. I've anglicized them a little bit because some of them were a bit American. But she said here, these are very, very helpful.

We confess our foolishness of denying you as the one living God. She's confessing the sins of the nation of America. We confess our foolishness of denying you as the one true living God, our creator, to whom we are accountable, living as though our lives were a cosmic accident with no eternal significance, purpose or meaning.

We confess that we have failed to treat your name as holy, instead only treating it so often as a swear word. We confess that we have failed to cherish the message of the cross and resurrection, such love shown, and our response is to mock doubt and fail to notice.

[51 : 35] We confess that we no longer fear you, and thus we have not even the beginning of wisdom to which to handle the vast knowledge that we now possess. confess. We confess that we have succumbed to the pressure of pluralism in our desire to be inclusive so that we honour other gods as though you were just one of many.

We confess that we have allowed material things to deceive us into thinking that we don't need you. We confess that we live as though material wealth and prosperity will bring us happiness.

This is for the UK, I adjusted it. We confess our greed that we as a nation have run up a debt of 1.7 trillion pounds, expecting our children and grandchildren to pick up the tab for the public services we refuse to pay for today.

We confess our national addiction to sex, to money, to pleasure, to entertainment, to pornography, to technology, to drugs, to alcohol, to food, to television, to popularity, to ourselves.

We confess that we have marginalised truth and mainstreamed lies. We confess that we have become one nation under many gods, divided and polarised with licence to sin and justice that does not often follow the rule of law.

[52 : 58] We confess that we have mocked your created order and have thought ourselves qualified to change your unchanging pattern for sexuality and marriage. May God have mercy on us.

Shall we pray? Father, we thank you for Amos. We know that he spoke to your people all those years ago, but there are lessons for us today.

Thank you that Amos reminds us of the value of intercession. And we pray that we might be found to be an intercessing church. in our land, intercessors for our nation.

But we are reminded as well that our nation is a basket of ripe fruit. We are ripe for judgement with our wickedness. And we pray that we might be a prophetic church speaking your word into this dark nation.

Father, have mercy in our nation. give us a boldness and give us a clarity of thought and vision that enables us to see what's wrong in our land and to pray but to stand against it for that which is right and true and honourable.

[54 : 20] Father, help us. Amen.