

## Calamity: A Call for Repentance October 12, 2008 - Andy Crissinger

- Open Bibles to Amos, Chapter 4:6-13.
- Amos (along with the other minor prophets) is probably not a book we're often asked to turn to in church. Books like Amos, Habakkuk, and Hosea, are often difficult for us to read. They seem negative, gloomy, sometimes bizarre in their content; however, they are no less the Word of God than other books of the Bible. They may not make up as large a portion of our diet of scripture than say the gospels or the Psalms, but if we ignore them it is to our own detriment.
- Scheduled to preach this sermon in January, but service was cancelled due to an ice storm that threatened but never manifested. It's amazing God's timing; present circumstances make the content of the message particularly relevant.
- Earlier in the service we took time to pray for our nation, particularly regarding our current financial crisis. All over TV and radio. Mortgage crisis, government bailout bill, major financial companies disintegrating (Bear Stearns, Lehman Brothers, AIG). Closer to home—what's going to happen with Wachovia.
- From what I can tell, the most rosy predictions have our economy struggling for at least another year. The most gloomy commentators are actually using the Great Depression as a comparison to our current crisis.
- In the midst of all the media frenzy individual Americans are wondering what this means for their families' futures. Will we have enough money? Will we be able to afford our mortgage? Will we be able to buy food and gas? What will happen to our 401ks? Will we be able to retire? Anxiety abounds, fear is spreading, uncertainty has many tied up in knots. Fear and anxiety lead to blaming. We blame Wall Street and mortgage lenders for being greedy, homebuyers who naively took on bigger mortgages than they could handle, the government for being inept, etc.
- The truth is, none among us truly knows how bad this crisis will get. We can speculate and guess, but that's all we would be doing, guessing.
- How do we as Christians view these sorts of calamities? What is the proper response? This passage from Amos can help us answer these questions.
- Something to keep in mind before we read: This is a passage that communicates God's judgment on the people of Israel. It is pretty harsh. Some of us may be quick to dismiss these passages thinking that they are irrelevant to us. Or, we may focus so much on the aspect of final judgment found in the passage that we miss the incredible mercy of God that is displayed here. I would ask you to walk through the passage with me patiently, paying close attention to what is going on.

**BACKGROUND:** The words we are about to read are God's words to Israel through the prophet Amos. Amos wrote in the 700s BC, during the time of the divided kingdom – Amos prophesied in the northern kingdom of Israel. During Amos's ministry, Israel was actually experiencing a time of economic prosperity and peace; however, they were in the midst of a spiritual and social decline. The people were very religious, but their religious activities were idolatrous and insincere. Their hearts were not truly devoted to God. The economic success of the nation was accompanied by a lack of concern for the poor of the land. The rich got richer by preying on and extorting the poor. Israel persisted in its sin despite warnings that God had previously sent—warnings in the form of

calamities...crises sent into their lives to turn them back to God. Israel ignored them again and again, until it was too late.

And so we read what God has to say to Israel in Amos 4:6-13. Read passage.

**Thesis:** Our culture's typical response to calamity (natural disasters, acts of terrorism, financial loss, and other such catastrophes) is usually blaming. We look for a scapegoat and, when we find one, we just unload. What this passage from Amos can teach us is that our response as Christians to mass calamity should be self-examination and a turning to God. The truth is that these awful times can be vehicles of God to expose our pride, convict us sin, and draw us to repentance and restoration with Him.

### **Calamities – Vehicles of God**

Before we can truly understand how we are to respond to calamities, we must notice that this passage affirms God's sovereignty over the calamities that occurred in Israel. If we view calamities that come our way as merely bad luck, as without design and outside the realm of God's control, it will be impossible for us to respond rightly. If we see the events of the world as products of chance, there is nothing to be learned or gained from experiencing them.

However we know from the testimony of scripture and particularly this passage that God is Sovereign over the world He created, and thus over the events of history. These happenings are not haphazard and not out of God's control.

Notice the "I" who is the subject of all the plagues listed in the passage. That is God. He is taking credit (in some sense at least) for these catastrophes.

Notice also the affirmation of God's sovereignty and control in verse 13:

"forms the mountains and creates the wind" – sovereign over creation...

"declares to man what is his thought" – sovereign over mankind by revealing to them what He chooses to...

"makes the morning darkness" – sovereign over natural phenomenon

"treads on the heights of the earth" – an emphatic symbol of control (treading on something)

Who does all this describe? "The LORD, the God of hosts, is his name!"

**Therefore, when calamity strikes we must first acknowledge that nothing happens outside God's allowing it to happen. Therefore we must consider that the event is being used by God to accomplish some purpose.**

In this case, what was God's purpose in sending the calamities upon Israel? The answer is made obvious by the repetition of the phrase, "yet you did not return to me," declares the LORD. God sent the calamities to bring about a change in their hearts and behavior, to turn them back to him (more on this a bit later).

We need to make something very clear at this point—it could be easy for us to see God as being merely vindictive by sending these plagues upon Israel. However, that would be looking at things the wrong way. Rather, these plagues were acts of Grace, designed to bring about a restored relationship with God. This is the first key to understanding how we are to view catastrophes as vehicles of God to accomplish his purposes.

Well, you may say, if God wants to fix Israel's relationship with Him, why not just do it in a nicer manner? Why not just talk to them? Well, quite frankly, He had done that and so much more. Think of his deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt. Think of his giving them the 10 commandments and the Law. Think of his bringing them into the Promised Land. God could have very rightly said, "I have talked nicely to you for a long time, and it's not working." (Think of how this works with parenting...sometimes you've got to resort to more severe forms of punishment when gentle correction isn't working).

So what does God do in this case to "get Israel's attention?"

1. Cleanness of teeth – famine in the land
2. Withholding the rain – cause for the famine
3. Blight and mildew – further destruction of crops
4. Pestilence (after the manner of Egypt) and military conquering – possibly referring to the defeat at the hands of Syria a few years earlier
5. Overthrow like Sodom and Gomorrah

Here is how calamity works:

-exposing our pride and false sense of self-sufficiency and safety – We as humans, in times of peace and prosperity, have a tendency to trust in our material wealth, we trust that our fortunes will always remain the same and constant, to trust that no harm will ever befall us. In so doing we are often prone to forget God, to forget that everything good we have comes from Him. God had specifically warned the Israelites that this could happen in

**Deuteronomy 29:18-20** Beware lest there be among you a root bearing poisonous and bitter fruit, one who, when he hears the words of this sworn covenant, blesses himself in his heart, saying, 'I shall be safe, though I walk in the stubbornness of my heart.' This will lead to the sweeping away of moist and dry alike. The LORD will not be willing to forgive him, but rather the anger of the LORD and his jealousy will smoke against that man, and the curses written in this book will settle upon him, and the LORD will blot out his name from under heaven.

- Calamity helps us realize we are not autonomous, that we can't rely on ourselves, that we absolutely NEED God.

What makes these specific calamities even more pointed is that they were the covenant punishments God told the Israelites he would issue if they broke their covenant with him in Deuteronomy 28 (reads almost exactly the same)...Israelites should have made the connection and seen what was happening, and yet they persisted instead in their stubbornness of heart.

Remember, it is important to see that God's goal in his disciplining of the Israelites is **restoration**--

**Hebrews 12:6-11** For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives." It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

## A Proper Response – Repentance

How should the Israelites have responded to the calamities God sent their way? They should have “returned to him.” The Bible has a word for this sort of “returning” – it is called **repentance**. Repentance in the Bible refers to a “changing of the mind” but it is even more than that – it is a “turning.” It refers to a turning from sin and turning to God. This, likewise, should be our first inclination when encounter great calamities.

## Possible Objections to the Application of this Text

Now some of you may already have some questions bouncing around in your head.

“Aren’t some calamities the work of the devil, or simply the result of living in a fallen world?”

“Are you saying that if something bad happens to someone, that that means they have sinned and are being disciplined and need to repent?”

Likewise, some of you may be thinking that this message sounds like the kind of comments we heard from Christian pundits shortly after Hurricane Katrina, which blamed the destruction of the storm on the sins of certain people living in the city.

Let me respond to these questions and concerns.

**First** – it is true that at times Satan, and at times the mere fallen-ness of the world we live in are to blame for calamity. We can’t always assume a one-to-one correlation between bad things that happen and God’s discipline for sin. However, that doesn’t change the fact that God is sovereign over the events that happen. The book of Job is a good example of this. Job was “blameless and upright.” The things that happened to him were not a result of his sin. Satan is the one who brought torment to Job; however, God gave him permission to do so. Therefore the calamity that occurred in Job’s life was not without design. God was in control, and he was still using what happened to accomplish his purposes.

**Second** – Please don’t misunderstand--this message is not meant to insinuate that everyone who experiences awful things is being punished for sin. (See the story of Jesus healing the blind man in John 9.)

**Third** – We are in a bit of a different situation than the Israelites were in the time of Amos. Amos is speaking directly to Israel as God’s mouthpiece, so he is able to make a clear connection between their persistent sin, and God’s sending of the plagues. The plagues were sent because of Israel’s sin, and we know this for sure because God tells us so through Amos. We do not have the ability to make the same sort of clear infallible connections between a calamity and a specific sin today. To say that Katrina hit New Orleans because of homosexuals or that the financial crisis is currently happening because of some specific sin is assuming we can get inside the mind of God. It’s a very dangerous thing to do.

Still, even though we must make these caveats, it does not change the fact that calamity should cause us to examine ourselves.

Luke 13:1-5—this text is the key to understanding what we’re talking about. In this passage, Jesus is being questioned by some folks about this very issue:

**Luke 13:1-5** There were some present at that very time who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And he answered them, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen on whom the tower in

Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."

What is happening here? We can tell by Jesus' answer to the initial question posed to him that the people were trying to insinuate that the Galileans who were killed by Pilate had received that fate due to some sin they had committed. Jesus says this is not the case, and adds another example to make his point even stronger.

One of the principles we can take from this passage is exactly what we've been talking about up to this point. Calamities, even those we observe from afar that don't even touch us personally, should call each of us back to a place of humility.

How? We should be reminded that each of us deserves an even worse fate than the most horrible catastrophe:

**Ephesians 2:1-3** And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience - among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.

Thankfully, Paul goes on to say:

**Ephesians 2:4-9** But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ - by grace you have been saved - and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

**Back to Amos** – God gave the Israelites opportunity after opportunity to turn to him and they did not. The final verses of this chapter 12-13, give the sense of finality to the matter. Israel is now going to "meet" her God in judgment. Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 5:10, that each of us will also have to "appear before the judgment seat of Christ." If we persist in sin and stubbornness of heart despite all the opportunities God gives us to repent and turn to Him, that "appear before the judgment seat of Christ," will be the awful thing that is being alluded to in Amos. However, if we turn to God, repent of our sin, and trust in Christ for our righteousness, then we will be saved.

## Conclusion

Application to our current scenario (the looming financial crisis). The worst thing that could happen would be for us to come out of this financial crisis collectively unchanged as a nation. We would then be like the Israelites.

1. **Examine our lives** – Remember that we were once "children of wrath" who deserved death. Be thankful for the grace we've received from God through Christ Jesus and let that give us perspective on what we're experiencing. If we do this, we won't become bitter and angry, blaming others, because we know that we deserved much worse when we were in our sin. If we end up watching others go through hard times but we ourselves are unscathed, we won't be able to smugly assume it is because we are more righteous than they. Rather, we will have compassion because we understand that if it were not for the grace of God, we could be in a similar situation.
2. **Acknowledge God's Sovereign hand at work in the events as they unfold:** So much of what we're seeing right now unfold in our country in regard to this financial crisis is a

result of fear. Fear seems to be driving so much of this. As Christians, we must ask ourselves: are we putting our trust in God or in ourselves and our wealth? Are we fully relying on Him to provide for our needs?

**Matthew 6:31-34** Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. "Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.

3. **Pray for our Nation** – pray that this time of crisis would help to convince people of their need for God, and that their hearts would be turned to him. That this time of trouble would be a catalyst for revival.