

November 20, 2005

“What It Is to Pray” Amos 7:1-6

FCF: Lost and untaken opportunity

PROPOSITION: (anchor) Because we stand in a relationship initiated by the LORD,
(magnet) our prayers must reflect the dynamics of that relationship.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

A lesson from this past week – not knowing whose company you’re in can lead to a lost opportunity. I had a lunch appointment up by Gate 4. And as I was preparing to place my order, I noticed a man in line who looked familiar. But I couldn’t place him. Then, after he had headed to his table, it hit me. That was Master Sergeant Luis Rodriguez – the medic whose home was redone by the “Extreme Home Makeover” crew last summer. That’s how I recognized him – from television. And I thought, “*Man! I would have liked to ask how his leg was holding up, how his family liked the house – and how many fish were in that tank.*” But, not knowing who he was, I didn’t say anything.

There’s a parallel to prayer. Not knowing whose company we’re in can lead to a lost opportunity here as well. In this case, not the company of a celebrity but of our Creator and Savior. Not thinking about that, too often we don’t lay hold of Him. We don’t speak to Him as we should. Or maybe, even worse, we don’t speak to Him at all.

SCRIPTURE READING: Amos 7:1-6

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON INTRODUCTION:

Relationship shapes communication. Our standing with another person – who they are to us and us to them – drives much of how we communicate. In fact, ideally we should be able to determine the nature of relationship by the way the parties relate to each other. Respect indicating a child to a parent. Affection – a husband to a wife. Submission – subordinates to superiors, even in the context of friendship. I was forwarded the communication between two chaplains recently and found it to be so striking. In one place, the junior officer said to the senior, “*Sir, I smile just thinking of you!*” It came out so beautifully – formality but yet warmth between these two brothers.

What does this have to do with Amos? Remember where we are in our study. In the first section of the book, the roar of wrath and coming judgment is heard. In the second section, the enemy has begun to circle. And now, in this third section, the hammer finally falls. Amos is given a vision – two in our text – first a swarm of locusts and then an unquenchable fire. Both, while distinct, threaten to destroy his audience, the people of Israel. In response, Amos cries out. And the LORD relents. The crucial issue was this: would the LORD be faithful to His promises to protect those who are faithful to Him? Or will He simply wipe them all indiscriminately off the map? Yes, He would be faithful to those promises – neither natural nor supernatural forces would harm them.

But how would this come about? How would His faithfulness be demonstrated? How would it be carried out? What means would be used? Prayer. The prophet prays. The LORD hears. And the LORD relents. Prayer can be described in various ways. One we talked about several month’s ago in a class was “*A believer’s communication with God.*” Let me suggest another – “*A believer’s response to God’s initiative.*” Not His to ours but ours to His. Back to the thesis – relationship shapes communication. We stand in a relationship initiated by the LORD. He initiates with us at every point. And so it would seem only right that our prayers should reflect the dynamics of that relationship.

What do I mean by that? Well, let’s look again at our text.

I. SEEKING HIS PERSPECTIVE

Who has taken this initiative? To whom are we praying? The LORD God Almighty, the Alpha and the Omega, the source of all wisdom. Ours is not to inform Him as to what is going on. Ours is to seek His perspective in what is going on. Think with me. What is Amos' posture as he prays? (READ Amos 7:2, 5)

A) *Seeing Ourselves as We Are*

Unlike his contemporaries, Amos begins not by putting a happy sheen on the situation but with how it really was – seeing himself and his people as they were.

1. Dependent

“Please cease! How can Jacob stand? He is so small.” So small, so insignificant, so helpless, so dependent, so much in need of intervention.

2. Guilty

“Please forgive! How can Jacob stand? He is so small.” So wayward, so stubborn, so blemished, so stained, so guilty, so much in need of forgiveness.

B) *Seeing God as He Is*

Amos shows us the place to begin is to see the situation rightly, as it is without any spin or foolish idealism – seeing who we are and who God is as well.

1. Mighty

“Jacob is weak and helpless but You are mighty. Oh, LORD, cease! Help us!”

2. Merciful

“Jacob is sinful and guilty but You are merciful and can pardon. Oh, LORD, forgive!”

Application:

This is the posture of prayer – being real, recognizing ourselves as creatures dependent in need of the LORD's continual intervention, as sinners guilty in need of the LORD's continual forgiveness. Seeing things from His perspective, as they are.

II. GRASPING HIS PROMISES

But Amos shows us something else. As we see things from the LORD's perspective, we then take the next step in grasping His promises. Again, who is it that has taken this initiative? To whom are we praying? (READ Amos 7:1-2, 4-5)

A) *Hearing His Word*

Simply put, Amos comes in prayer having heard the LORD's Word.

1. Threatened destruction

Destruction was threatened. A locust plague so timed that survival would be impossible. A fire capable of destroying sea and land. Complete devastation seems imminent.

2. Promised deliverance

Destruction threatened yet deliverance promised. The LORD had promised a Deliverer through this nation. How was that to come if the nation would be utterly destroyed?

B) *Acting upon It*

Amos has heard the LORD's Word. He has taken it to heart. And He prays.

1. Putting it together

He puts it together. He holds these two seemingly contradictory things together.

2. Bringing it forward

And He brings them forward. He takes the LORD at His Word and brings them forward.

Application:

Which is exactly what we are to do. I mentioned the posture of our prayers. Here we see something of the content of our prayers as well. Here we are shown that there are

times when we must come with the promise in one hand and the threat in the other. *“Lord, this is what you’ve said. It’s all I have. But this is what’s going on. And it’s all I see. This is what you’ve said. But this is what I see. Help us. Help us.”*

III. ACCOMPLISHING HIS PURPOSES

Seeking His purposes and grasping His promises – both important and reflected in our text. But the heart of what we see here is this: prayer as a means of accomplishing the LORD’s purposes. Again, who has initiated this relationship? To whom do we pray? The God who has a place for His people in His plans (**READ Amos 7:2-3, 5-6**).

A) *Governing All Things*

God is sovereign. That means He governs and rules in, over, and through all things – all peoples, all places for His purposes. Think of what we see here in Amos.

1. The sifting

A sifting was to take place. Calamity was to come so horrific it would seem as though there would be no hope whatsoever – foreign armies, siege warfare, exile. This sifting would have the effect of a sieve – seemingly sweeping, destructive, and indiscriminate.

2. The sparing

But in this sifting so too there would be a sparing – a remnant would be preserved.

B) *Governing All Means to All Things*

This is what the LORD planned to do. But how? Here we see not only His governing rule over all things, all ends, but all means to all ends as well.

1. The prompting

(**READ Amos 7:1a, 4a**) The LORD shows Amos visions. Which then had what effect?

A prompting. A prompting. Doug Kelly puts it this way (**READ [Tabletalk](#), 4/93, p.53**):

He reveals His promises to His people; He creates faith in their hearts to believe those promises; He puts them in difficult situations in which they need to pray; and He sends His Spirit to stir them up to do so.

2. The praying

Here in Amos 7, we see the LORD prompting His servant, stirring him to pray. Which then has what effect? As a foreordained means to a foreordained end. Several quotes are in your bulletin on this point. Listen to one by R. C. Sproul (**READ [Tabletalk](#), 4/93, p.7**):

Prayer is one of the means God uses to bring about the ends He ordains. That is, God not only ordains ends, He ordains the means He uses to bring about those ends.

And the results of this prayer were so striking that, from man’s perspective, the LORD appears to, as Amos says, “relent”. Now we know from other clear statements in the Scriptures that God is immutable. He does not change – His character or His mind. His thoughts, perception, and understanding are such He could not need to. Indeed, it is not only impossible, it is undesirable as well. Would we want creatures such as ourselves – given our ignorance, bias, and fickleness – to be able to do such a thing? But still the Scriptures speak of His “relenting”. Such are the limits of human language. Such are the depths of His condescension that He would describe Himself in such ways to us.

But here’s the point. Listen. God foreordains all things. And in some cases, that which He has foreordained, He has determined to bring about only through prayer.

Illustration:

John Piper illustrates it this way (**READ [The Godward Life](#), p.145**):

If God predestines that I die of a bullet wound, then I will not die if no bullet is fired. If God predestines that I be healed by surgery, then if there is no surgery, I will not be healed. If God predestines heat to fill my home by a fire in the furnace, then if there is no fire, there will be no heat.

Application:

If God predestines that something will only come about by prayer, then that thing will not come about unless His people pray. Clearly there are some things – not all things but some things – He will only bring to pass through the means of His peoples’ prayers. Such is the way He has determined to work – foreordaining both the ends and the means.

Now, what does that say about our role in His work? What does that tell us about the place of prayer in the Christian life? Does it not tell us that, when it comes to this matter of prayer, there is much more going on that we realize? That there are unfathomable effects brought about, incalculable power turned loose when we pray?

Such is the wonder of prayer and our calling to pray! Oh, I have to tell you that to my shame I have only recently really begun to understand this. For too long I have thought too much of prayer in terms of an immutable God and His mutable servants. You see, there are indeed benefits to prayer. And we do need to consider them. He cannot be and does not need to be changed. But we do. And because of that He does indeed prompt us to pray. It grounds us. It stirs us. It prepares us. There are benefits.

But more than that there is power! He does not just change us as we pray. He changes the things around us when we pray. He does not just work in us. He works through us. Our prayers have a causal effect in the things He has willed to carry out. Our prayers have a causal effect in the things He has willed to carry out. And because of that – because He is determined to do what He will do and how He will do it – He prompts us all the more! This should fill our hearts with wonder. And drive us all the more to pray.

CONCLUSION:

Back to the beginning. The way we pray should be shaped by the relationship we have with the One to whom we pray. And who is He? Amos shows us He is the God who has a place for His people in His plans – especially a place for our prayers. Let me put it this way. Prayer matters. Prayer matters because of who we pray to and His purposes in our praying. Do we believe that prayer matters? I think we do. Do we pray like prayer matters? Well, here, I’m not so sure. How, after all, do we pray?

Richard Foster tells the story of an incident at a college where he taught when a student fell out of the back of a truck and landed headfirst on the concrete. While waiting for the ambulance, fellow students gathered around her fervently praying for healing. A little while later, as their meeting started, the faculty also prayed. But in a different way. “*Lord, we commit Maria into your care.*” “*Lord, if it’s your will, heal her.*” Now, there was nothing theologically wrong with those prayers. They were perfectly sound. But as Foster points out, they were also perfectly flat. There was no expectancy, no sense that God might actually do something in this crisis. Yes, they needed to trust His care. Yes, they needed to submit their desires to His plans. But did they need to hold back in expressing those desires? Did they believe God works through prayer? And I wonder – what about us? How often are our prayers perfectly sound but yet perfectly flat as well?

Do we believe prayer matters? Amos did. Notice how he prays. Not “*LORD, please prepare your saints for this storm about to befall them. Your will be done.*” But “*LORD, please forgive! LORD, please spare! LORD, intervene! LORD, help us!*” Oh, LORD, help us. May we learn from and follow this example – praying to the God who works in all things, at all times, even and especially through the prayers of His people.

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