

SMITTEN IN VAIN

Earthquakes in California: A force or a failure, or a faith?



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“Come to Bethel, and transgress; at Gilgal multiply transgression; and bring your sacrifices every morning, and your tithes after three years: And offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving WITH LEAVEN, and proclaim and publish the free offerings: FOR THIS LIKETH YOU, O ye children of Israel, saith the Lord God.

“And I have also given you cleanness of teeth in all your cities, and want of bread in all your places: yet have ye not returned unto Me, saith the Lord. And also I have withholden the rain from you, when there were yet three months to the harvest: and I caused it to rain upon one city, and caused it not to rain upon another city: one piece was rained upon, and the piece whereupon it rained not withered. So two or three cities wandered unto one city, to drink water; but they were not satisfied: YET HAVE YE NOT RETURNED UNTO ME, SAITH THE LORD.

“I have smitten you with blasting and mildew: when your gardens and your vineyards and your fig trees and your olive trees increased, the palmerworm devoured them: YET HAVE YE NOT RETURNED UNTO ME, SAITH THE LORD.

“I have sent among you the pestilence after the manner of Egypt: your young men have I slain with the sword, and have taken away your horses; and I have made the stink of your camps to come up unto your nostrils: YET HAVE YE NOT RETURNED UNTO ME, SAITH THE LORD.

“Therefore thus will I do unto thee, O Israel: and because I will do this unto thee, prepared to meet thy God, O Israel. For, lo, He that formeth the mountains, and createth the wind, and declareth unto man what is His thought, that maketh the morning darkness, and treadeth upon the high places of the Earth, The Lord, The God of hosts, is His Name.” Amos 4:4-13.

The reign of Jerobaom II was one of brilliant military success and of profound moral degradation. Amos was a simple, hardy shepherd from the southern wilds of Judah, and his prophecies are redolent of his early life, both in their homely imagery and in the wholesome indignation and contempt for the silkened-robed vice of Israel.

No sterner picture of an utterly rotten social state was ever drawn than this book gives of the luxury, licentiousness and oppressiveness of the ruling classes. **This passage deals with the spiritual declension underlying the moral filth, and sets forth the self-willed idolatry of the people,** verses 4, 5; **their obstinate resistance to God’s merciful chastisement,** verse 6-11; and **the heavier impending judgment,** verses 12 and 13.

1. Indignant irony flashes in that permission or command to persevere in the calf worship. The seeming command is the strongest prohibition. **There can be no worse thing befall a man than that he should be left to go on frowardly in the way of his heart.** The real meaning is sufficiently emphasized by that second verb, **“and transgress.”**

“Flock to one temple after another, and heap altars with sacrifices which you were never bid to offer, but understand that what you do is not worship, but sin.” **This is a smiting sentence to pass upon elaborate ceremonies.** The word means literally “treason or rebellion,” and by it Amos at one blow shatters the whole fabric.

Note, too, that the offering of tithes was not called for by Mosaic Law **“every three days,”** Revised Version, and that the use of leaven in burnt offerings was prohibited by it. **Also that to CALL FOR free will offerings was to turn spontaneousness into some-**

thing like compulsion, and to bring ostentation into worship.

All these characteristics spoiled the apparent religiousness, over and above the initial evil of disobedience, and warrant Amos's crushing equation, "Your worship is rebellion."

All are driven home by the last words of verse 5. "So ye love it." **The reason for all this prodigal ostentatious worship was to "please themselves," not to obey God.** That tainted everything, AND ALWAYS DOES.

The lessons of this burst of sarcasm are plain. **The subtle influence of self creeps in even in worship, and makes it hollow, unreal, and powerless to bless the worshipper. Obedience is better than costly gifts.**

Again, men will lavish gifts far more freely in apparent religious service, than in true service of God. Again, the purity of willing offerings is marred when they are given in response to a loud call, or when given, are proclaimed with acclamations.

Let us not suppose that all the brunt of Amos's indignation fell only on these old devotees. **The principles involved in it have a sharp edge, turned to a great deal which is allowed and fostered among ourselves.**

2. The blaze of indignation changes in the second part of the passage into wounded tenderness, as the prophet speaks in the Name of God, and recounts the dreary monotony of failure attending all God's loving attempts to arrest Israel's departure by the mercy of judgment.

Mark the sad cadence of the five-fold refrain. "Ye have not returned unto Me, saith the Lord." The "unto" implies reaching the object to which we turn, and is not the less forcible but a more usual word found in this phrase, which simply means, "towards" and indicates direction, without saying anything as to how far the return has gone.

So there may have been partial moments of bethinking themselves, when the chastisement was on Israel, **but there had been no thorough turning,** which had landed them at the side of God. **Many a man turns towards God, who, for lack of resolved perseverance, never so turns as to go to God.**

The repeated complaint of the inefficacy of chastisements has in it a tone of sorrow and wonder which does not belong only to the prophet. If we remember who it was that was "grieved at the blindness of their heart," and who "wondered at their unbelief," we shall not fear to recognize here the attribution of the same emotions to the heart of God.

To Amos, famine, drought, blasting, locusts, pestilence, and probably earthquakes were five messengers of God. Amos was taught by God. If we looked deeper we should see more clearly. The true view of the relation of the material things and events to God is this which the herdsman of Tekoa, proclaimed. These messengers were not "miracles" but they were God's messengers **all the same. Behind all phenomena stands a personal will, and they are nearer the secret of the universe who see God working in it all, that they who see all forces except the one which is the only true force.**

"I have cleanness of teeth." "I have withholden the rain." "I have smitten." "I have sent pestilence." "I have overthrown some of you."

To the prophet's eye the world is all aflame with a present God. Let no scientific views, important and illuminating as these may be, hide from us the deeper Truth, which lies beyond their region. A child who says, "God" has gotten nearer the center than the scientist who says, "force."

But Amos had another principle, that God sent physical calamities because of moral delinquencies and for moral and spiritual ends. These disasters were meant to bring Israel back to God, and were at once punishments and reformatory methods. No

doubt the connection between sin and material evils was closer under the Old Testament than now. But if we may not argue as Amos did, in reference to such calamities as drought, and failures of harvests, and the like, as these affect communities, we may, at all events, affirm that, in the case of the individual, **he is a wise man who regards all outward evil as having a possible bearing on his bettering spiritually.** "If a drought come, learn to look to your irrigation, and don't cut down your forests wantonly," say the wise men nowadays. "If a pestilence breaks out, see to your drainage." By all means.

Is God so poor that He can have but one purpose in a providence? Every sorrow, of whatever sort, is meant to produce all the good effects which it naturally tends to produce, and since every experience of pain and loss and grief naturally tends to wean us from the Earth, and to drive us to find in God what Earth can never yield. All our sorrows are His messengers to draw us back to Him. Amos's lessons as to the purpose of trials is not antiquated.

But he has still another to teach us, namely, **the awful power which we have of resisting God's efforts to draw us back.** "Our wills are ours, we know not how, but alas, it is too often not 'to make them Thine.'" This is the tragedy of the world that God calls, and we do refuse, even as it is the deepest mystery of sinful manhood that **God calls and we can refuse.** What infinite pathos and grieved love, thrown back upon itself, is in that refrain, "Ye have not returned unto Me."

How its recurrence speaks of the long-suffering which multiplied means as others failed, and of the Divine GRACE and love which "suffered long," and which was "not soon angry," and "hoped all things." How vividly it gives the impression of the obstinacy that to all effort opposed insensibility, and clung the more closely and insanely to the idolatry which was its crime and its ruin.

The very same temper is deep in us all. **Israel holds up the mirror in which we may see ourselves.** If blows do not break iron, they harden it. **A wasted sorrow, that is, a sorrow which does not drive us to God, leaves us less impressible than it found us.**

3. Again the mood changes, and the issue of protracted resistance is prophesied in verses 12 and 13. "Therefore," which sums up the instances of refusal to be warned, and presents them as the cause of the coming evil. The higher the dam is piled, the deeper the water that is gathered behind it, and the surer and more destructive the flood when it bursts. **Long delayed judgments are sever in proportion, as they are slow.** Note the awful vagueness of the threatening in that emphatic, "thus," as if the prophet had the event before his eyes. There is no need to specify, for there can be but one result from such obstinacy.

"The terror of the Lord" is more moving by reason of the dimness which wraps it. **The contact of Divine power with human rebellion can only end in one way, and that is too terrible for speech.** Conscience can translate "thus,"

The thunder cloud is all the more dreadful for the vagueness of its outline, where its livid hues melt into formless black. What bold lurks in its gloom?

The certainty of judgment is the basis of a call to a change of mind which may avert it. The meeting with God for which Israel is besought to prepare, was, of course, **not judgment after death,** but the impending destruction of the northern kingdom.

But Amos's prophetic call is not misapplied when directed to that final day of the Lord. **Common sense teaches preparation for a certain future,** and Amos's trumpet note is deepened and re-echoed by Jesus Christ Himself, "Be ye ready also for... the Son of man cometh." Note too that **Israel's peculiar relation to God is the very ground of the certainty of its punishment, and of the appeal for a change of mind, to**

meet Him. "PREPARE TO MEET THY GOD, O ISRAEL."

The conditions of meeting the Judge, and being "found of Him in peace," are that we should be "without spot and blameless." **The conditions of being so spotless and un-censurable are, what they were in Amos's day, a change of mind and trust. We have Jesus Christ as the brightness of the Father's glory to trust in, and His all sufficient work to trust to, for pardon and cleansing. "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."**

The magnificent proclamation of the Name of the Lord which closes the passage, is meant as at once a guarantee of His judgment and an enforcement of the call to be ready to meet Him. He in creation forms the solid, changeless mountains, and the viewless passing wind. The most stable and the most mobile are His work. **He reads men's minds, and can tell them their thoughts afar off.** He is the Author of all changes, both in the physical and the moral world, bringing the daily wonder of sunrise and the nightly shroud of darkness, and with like al-

ternation blending joy and sorrow in men's lives.

He "treads on the high places of the Earth," making all created elevations the path of His feet, and crushing down whatever exalts itself. **Thus in creation almighty, in knowledge omniscient, in providence changing all things and Himself the same, subjugating all, and leveling a path for His purposes across every opposition, He manifests His Name as the living, eternal JEHOVAH, the God of the Covenants, and therefore of judgment on its breakers, and as the Commander and God of the embattled forces of the universe.**

Is this a God whose coming to judge is to be lightly dealt with? Is not this a God whom it is wise for us to be ready to meet?

"EVEN SO COME,"

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