

CHAPTER THREE

Love and wrath in one and the same breath

Amos 1 – 3:8

3.1 Introduction – the book of Amos

Amos, a sheep farmer in Tekoa. Not a shepherd. Shepherds belonged to the lower class, people looked down on them. But a farmer was an independent employer. We know about one of the kings of Moab that he also was a sheep farmer.

Amos came from Tekoa, a little town in Judah. But he went to prophesy in the kingdom of the ten tribes. He carried out his task in a politically stable period. The kings mentioned in chapter 1:1 (Uzziah of Judah and Jeroboam II of Israel) reigned 52 and 41 years respectively.

Whoever reads the book of Amos discovers how the LORD wrestles for the heart of His people. It is because the LORD loves His people so much that He is also strict (compare with chapter 3:2). He does not want His people to surrender to sin, as sin ruins life. That is why the LORD uses Amos. Not a poor prophet, but a man who, because of his position - being financially independent - can speak freely.

3.2 Within sight of the judgment

Amos spoke his words two years before the earthquake (1:1). An earthquake happens, and suddenly all surety and protection disappears. Everything is shaky. Nothing is sure any longer. An earthquake confronts you with the seriousness of God's judgment. If you then still look for support within yourself or in the things of this world, you will always be disappointed and you will never find support.

The mention of the earthquake in chapter 1:1 is a clarion call to the reader: make sure that you take Amos' words, God's words, seriously. The LORD does not only threaten with His judgment (see for instance chapter 2:13 (NIV): "*Now then, I will crush you as a cart crushes when loaded with grain.*") but He also carries it out. Hundreds of years later the people still remember it. The prophet Zechariah in chapter 14:5 still reminds them of the earthquake.

Amos *saw words concerning Israel*. That does not mean he received visions. It points to the fact that he witnessed the words of the LORD being fulfilled in his lifetime. He judged his time according to the Word of God. But he also realised that God's words were an inescapable truth, which you cannot avoid.

3.3 Consumptive faith

Amos lived and worked in a time of considerable affluence. In chapter 3:15, for instance, we read about winter houses, summer houses, ivory houses and in chapter 4:1 about the 'fat cows' (idle, self-indulgent women) in Samaria. As far as material things were concerned many people were quite satisfied with their lives. You see it more often, in a time when people think they are in a financially healthy position they will also think that the LORD is quite satisfied with them. Their complacency is also apparent in another way. They thought they could look forward to the day of the LORD (5:18), but did not even realise that that day would turn out to be a terrible shock for them.

The day of the LORD: in the Old Testament it is an indication of the time that the LORD will come as Redeemer and Judge. In the Old Testament that has a certain perspective. It is not only the day of the second coming, but also refers to the coming of the Lord Jesus. It is the time when everything is brought to a head. In the New Testament we think of the coming of the Lord Jesus, when He will judge the living and the dead.

Self-satisfied people easily commit grave sins. The poor were exploited (2:6). There was talk of sexual perversion (2:7). It was the time of self-willed religion with the bull calves in Bethel and Dan.

The LORD had given his people Nazarites (see Numbers 6 for example). A Nazarite was someone who totally dedicated himself to the LORD. This meant he did not drink anything containing alcohol. It had to be obvious that his enthusiasm was not a result of spirituous liquor but was exclusively brought about by the life-giving Spirit. Israel did not appreciate this gift, however. They said to these Nazarites: don't be such a poser. Don't act so piously, have another one (2:11ff)!

The LORD had also given his people prophets. But in Israel they said: put a stop to your pious stories. Don't be so difficult. Don't disturb us with those heavy sermons. Be content. We're well off, aren't we? (2:11ff; 7:12ff).

We can see how dangerous affluence can be for your faith. If you are well off, and there is much to choose from and to consume in this

life, then before you know it you also start to choose and consume in matters of faith and church.

You do not only choose the clothes that suit you. You also choose the faith or the church that suits you. The customer is king. The result is that you will determine for yourself as to how far you are prepared to subject yourself to the Word of God. Then it becomes especially important that the Word of God is preached in an appealing manner. Also with Bible reading, it is important that the subject matter appeals to you. And if it does not appeal to you, if you cannot do anything with it, you leave it unread...

3.4 Harsh words from which you cannot escape

When reading the book of Amos you may at times be taken aback by the harsh tone. You read e.g. in 1:2: "*The LORD roars from Zion.*" The LORD observes how His people are backsliding. Before it is too late the LORD roars. Repent! Turn around! Come this way, towards me.

In Israel they had not expected such harsh words. They felt they were God's elected people. After all, we are church people...there is no need for us to repent.

That God's judgment would strike the wicked world did not surprise them. But that it would strike God's own people? And yet: the LORD awakens His people from this carelessness. In chapter 1 the LORD visits Israel's neighbouring nations with his judgment. Each time it sounds like thunder: "*for three transgressions... and for four...*" At first it is directed at a number of typical heathen nations (Damascus, Aram; Gaza, the Philistines; Tyre).

The people in the church can still feel safe if the preaching is against or about others. But then the thunderstorm of judgment comes closer: Israel's brother nations are being struck. Edom, the descendants of Esau; Ammon and Moab, the descendants of Lot (see Genesis 19:30-38).

And then the judgment comes upon Judah, the people with which Israel ought to be united.

And then... no, the thunderstorm does not pass over. The thunderstorm settles exactly above Israel's head. And there it stays, too. The LORD does not stop speaking to his people. The LORD roars (1:2 and 3:8). Listen to reason!

Amos wants to drum it into his people: see for yourself that the LORD comes with his judgment. In 3:3-6 Amos gives a few examples: when you hear a lion roar in the forest, you know that this animal is ready

to pounce on his prey. You do not even have to see it for yourself. You just believe it. And when the trumpet is sounded in the city, you will be on the alert. Then you know that there is danger. Even while you cannot yet see the danger, you really believe that it is there. Though you draw conclusions when you hear the roaring of the lion and the signal of the trumpet, why then do you not draw conclusions when the LORD in all seriousness comes to you with His Word?

3.5 Harsh words from a warm heart (I)

Obviously we would rather hear loving and comforting words than harsh words in which the judgment is proclaimed to us. Yet we should not play them off against each other. In the prophecy of Amos they are even closely connected with each other. I want to point out two occasions.

First look at 1:2. The LORD roars. He uses a harsh tone. That does not sound loving. But it also mentions something else: the LORD roars *from Zion*. From Jerusalem, that is. From the temple, the place where everything speaks of God's love, of atonement from guilt and sin. He warns His people with great love. The warning can pierce you to the very marrow. But in passionate love the LORD shows his care, for if His people do not listen, they will perish in His judgment.

When you hear the Word of God in all its seriousness and sharpness, you should not stop your ears for what may be quite harsh words. For no matter how pressing God's call to you may be, He never wants to corner you. He speaks to you *in Christ* (2 Corinthians 5:21). For with Him there is forgiveness, and therefore freedom.

3.6 Harsh words from a warm heart (II)

The second example I wish to point to can be found in 3:2. There the LORD says to His people: "*You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities*".

"*I have known you...*" – means that the LORD loves His people. Here you may even think of God's election. The LORD says to His people: I have chosen you! That sounds warm.

But then listen to the conclusion He makes: "*therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities.*"

Here we have them side by side – the high tones of love, and the bass of God's wrath. Or better, the bass of the Gospel. Yes, the LORD is fiercely angry with His people. Why? Because He had chosen them. To this particular nation He had pledged his love, and this love makes His wrath understandable.

Election is namely not a thesis which you can debate endlessly, or which you can continue to doubt. But election is something by which God addresses you personally. The LORD says: I love you...

Election then also means, of course, that God confirms His declaration of love with deeds. He fusses over you. The LORD even mentions it in 3:1 and 2:9. He delivered His people from Egypt. He led His people along that long road through the desert. What patience He showed with often grumbling people. It is not as if we had anything to offer to the LORD (Deuteronomy 7:7), but the LORD wanted us to live close to Him. That is why He chose us “*that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love*” (Ephesians 1:4).

Why then those harsh words?

Because the LORD does not want to lose His people. Because He loves His people so much. In order that they would not allow themselves to be taken in by sin, and be lost.

It can be quite painful when the LORD calls you to give account. But that is not a reason to be afraid of God. For especially in the pronouncement of the judgment you also get to know Him as the compassionate God. He speaks in love, as your Redeemer. He does not cause you to be afraid of Him. He makes you afraid of sin, though, while at the same time He opens your eyes to his forgiving love.

3.7 Suggestions for in-depth discussion

1. Discuss the following statement:

Absence of judgment preaching cheapens the gospel.

It is like a church organ without a pedal: it cannot carry the congregation. If the notion of guilt and sin becomes superficial, the notion of grace also becomes wafer- thin.

2. How do we listen to the Word of the LORD? We are keen to hear about his deep love for us. But do we also allow ourselves to be addressed by his harsh words? Or are we inclined to only pick and choose from the Bible what appeals to us?

Are we aware of the risk of ‘consumptive Bible use’?

Measure that against what you read at home.

3. When it concerns the preaching about the judgment, a contrast is often made between the Old Testament and the New Testament. The New Testament is then said to speak much more clearly about God’s love. What are your thoughts on this?

In this context you cannot avoid the letter to the Hebrews: a letter in which the contrast between the Old and the New

Testament repeatedly comes to the fore. In any case, include Hebrews 10:32-34 and 12:25-27 in your discussion. You could also discuss the expression: *the wrath (!) of the Lamb* (Revelation 6:16-17).

4. Because this Bible study deals especially with the theme 'God lets Himself be known', I have not really dealt with the content of the various proclamations of judgment in chapter 1. Whoever delves deeper into that material will also get to know much more about the LORD. In the judgments you discover much about the LORD's care for His people, He guards them closely.

Two examples:

- The particular sin of Damascus is the mistreatment of Gilead (God's people on the other side of the Jordan). The LORD will not accept that.
 - The sin of Gaza (Philistines) is that they handed over God's own people, Judah, to Edom. The LORD does not accept that, either.
5. What does it mean for us that we may know ourselves to be the LORD's elect? Are we also not in danger of making election a doctrinal problem, in the meantime ignoring the personal claim which the LORD lays upon us in this election? You can also include Ephesians 1:4 in your discussion. Paul speaks enthusiastically about the fact that the LORD has elected us, and expands on this theme in his letter. This letter clearly shows how the miracle of our election determines our character as church and as a Christian.

3.8 Extra project

Material needed: this book and a pen or pencil.

In the margin of the book each member places an exclamation mark at a word or a part of this chapter which really struck him/her in a special way, and a question mark at a word or passage he/she would like to query.

In small groups or (later) in a general discussion you explain why you have marked these sections.