

Pride comes before a fall

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 24 May 2015

Preacher: Edward Lobb

[0 : 00] Well, let's turn now to our Bible reading in the prophet Amos. Tonight we're in Amos chapter 6, and if you have one of our big church Bibles, you'll find this on page 768.

The prophet Amos was sent from the land of Judah to the land of Israel. Not many miles, but he had to cross a very important border between the southern kingdom where he came from, Judah, and the northern kingdom.

And he had a message from God for the people of Israel, and we hear part of it here in chapter 6. Woe to those who are at ease in Zion, and to those who feel secure on the mountain of Samaria, the notable men of the first of the nations, to whom the house of Israel comes.

Pass over to Calneh, and see, and from there go to Hamath the Great. Then go down to Gath of the Philistines. Are you better than these kingdoms?

Or is their territory greater than your territory? O you who put far away the day of disaster, and bring near the seat of violence. Woe to those who lie on beds of ivory, and stretch themselves out on their couches, and eat lambs from the flock, and calves from the midst of the stall, who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp, and like David, invent for themselves instruments of music, who drink wine in bowls, and anoint themselves with the finest of oils, but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph.

[1 : 46] Therefore they shall now be the first of those who go into exile, and the revelry of those who stretch themselves out shall pass away. The Lord God has sworn by himself, declares the Lord, the God of hosts.

I abhor the pride of Jacob, and hate his strongholds, and I will deliver up the city and all that is in it. And if ten men remain in one house, they shall die.

And when one's relative, the one who anoints him for burial, shall take him up to bring the bones out of the house, and shall say to him who is in the innermost parts of the house, Is there still anyone with you?

He shall say, No. And he shall say, Silence. We must not mention the name of the Lord. For behold, the Lord commands, and the great house shall be struck down into fragments, and the little house into bits.

Do horses run on rocks? Does one plough the sea? Probably the best reading, plough the sea with oxen? But you have turned justice into poison, and the fruit of righteousness into wormwood.

[2 : 58] You who rejoice in Lodebar, who say, Have we not by our own strength captured Kanaim for ourselves? For behold, I will raise up against you a nation, O house of Israel, declares the Lord, the God of hosts, and they shall oppress you from Lebo Hamath to the brook of the Araba.

This is the word of the Lord, and may it be a blessing and a strength to us this evening. Do let's turn up Amos chapter 6 again, page 768.

I very much like our new church entrance, don't you? I very much like coming in through those big plate glass doors on the street there.

The three words set above the entrance look so solid. The Tron Church. Block capitals. No fancy modern font there.

It's good old-fashioned four-square capital letters. Seems strong, doesn't it? You walk in through those doors. You begin to feel good. There's somebody there who welcomes you in, shakes your hand, even sometimes gives you a hug.

[4 : 07] It's a warm and friendly and safe place to be, isn't it? And you leave all that mucky stuff outside. The drunkenness and the drugs and the wretched over-sexualization of everything and the glittering overpriced goods in the shops.

The rain. You leave it all outside, don't you, for an hour or two while you enjoy the warmth and the love and the support of the Lord's people. Now, it's good for us and it's important for us to enjoy the

warmth and the love and the support of the Lord's people.

We need it. And it's good for us to enjoy the praise and the prayer and the preaching. We need to get together regularly in an atmosphere like this so that we can be nourished and strengthened for the task of living the Christian life.

But it is back into that mucky world that we must later go. Jesus calls his followers the light of the world, not the light of the sanctuary.

Our light is to shine out there, not just to shine in here behind the plate glass doors of the Tron Church. Now, Amos the prophet gives us a fine example of addressing the world outside, addressing, if you like, his own contemporary world, which was every bit as dark and nasty as our modern world.

[5 : 27] He crossed the national border into Israel. He arrived there as a cross-cultural missionary. And risking life and limb, he declared the message of God to the people of Israel.

But he was a farmer. He wasn't a trained preacher. If there had been a preacher's training course in Jerusalem, certainly Amos had not been to it. He had spent his life rearing sheep, shearing sheep, producing sycamore figs.

But at the call of God, he was prepared to leave the quiet rhythms of farming life and tangle with the very painful and very messy and very sinful reality of the life of the people of Israel.

His message, like the message of all the other prophets, was a call to repentance under threat of judgment. Seek the Lord and live, he had cried out in chapter 5, verse 6.

Seek him and live, lest he break out like fire in the house of Joseph. Repent and live, because otherwise there will be judgment. But his call to repentance touches every aspect of the life of Israel.

[6 : 36] He has a great deal to say about social justice, as we've seen in the first five chapters of the book. He has a lot to say about rich people trampling on the heads of poor people, about bribery and corruption and greed, about corruption in the law courts, denying justice to people who are too poor to bribe the judge.

He challenges their sexual promiscuity and their drunkenness. And he makes it clear throughout his book that the root problem of their wayward lifestyle is their desertion of the Lord and of the law of Moses.

They're playing at religion. Oh, they have lots of religion, lots of religious activities. Sacrifices, noise, singing, playing musical instruments. But as the Lord says to them in chapter 5, verse 21, I hate, I despise your feasts.

I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. There is a deep waywardness in the people of Israel.

But the Lord's words to them through Amos are not simply about what you might call religion.

They're about everything. They're about politics. They're about national life. They're about the values that run right the way through society. Amos is speaking out there in the streets, not in here behind the plate glass doors.

[7 : 59] I remember years ago having a discussion with an elderly man about politics and Christianity. I think I was about 30 and he was about 80. He was a charming and delightful person, a man who had led an active life which had included a lot of public service.

In fact, he'd been a senior officer in the British Army in the Second World War. And then after the war, he'd become a regional administrator in Kenya, what was called in those days a district commissioner, in the days when Kenya was still a British colony.

He'd been much involved in the Mau Mau emergency in the 1950s, which was a time when groups of Kenyan nationalists rose up against the British regime, and a lot of blood was shed.

So this man had seen a great deal of politics in the raw. But he said to me, you can't mix up politics and Christianity, Edward. Christianity is for the church and politics is for the world.

In other words, come in through the plate glass doors of the church and leave all that muck and mess out there in the city. But that is not Amos' way.

[9 : 06] In Amos' view of things, the muck and the mess, the injustice and the corruption, all stems from Israel's desertion of the Lord. Human society is an interlocking jigsaw.

The Bible never cordons off religion from the life and values of the nation. If the Lord God made the world, and every human being in it, he is surely the Lord of the world, not only of the church.

And this is why Amos addresses all of society, not least its rulers. And this is why our gospel too today is a summons to the world, a summons to the world beyond the plate glass doors.

It's not just a message to the people who come to church. And our message is just like the message of Amos. It's a call to repentance in the face of the coming of judgment.

Now, of course, party politics has no place in our call to the world. Can you imagine one of our preachers, Willie Philip, for example, standing up here on a Sunday, expounding the glories of Scottish nationalism, or conservatism, or socialism?

[10:15] If that happened, we would leave church scratching our heads and beginning to compose disgruntled emails to send into the church office first thing on Monday morning. And quite rightly, party politics are not needed.

But politics in the wider sense of how a nation lives its life, certainly that needs to be addressed, because God addresses the world. And Amos here, in his sixth chapter, addresses the leaders of the nations.

Just look at his first verse, spoken to what he calls the notable men, the leaders in Zion and Samaria. There's irony there, the notable men. And just notice that he's speaking here to Zion, to Jerusalem, as well as to Samaria, the capital of Israel.

And in addressing the nation's political leaders, Amos is standing in a great biblical tradition. Just think back in time. Moses had had to grapple with the pharaoh of Egypt.

The prophet Elijah had had to confront Ahab, the wicked, godless King Ahab, and his terrible wife Jezebel. The prophet Isaiah had to bring God's message to King Ahaz of Judah.

[11:24] He was another godless king. And then think forward in time a few centuries. John the Baptist had to address Herod, and he was beheaded for his pains.

Paul the apostle made his defense before Felix and Festus, the Roman governors of Judea, and he was imprisoned. Jesus had to face Pontius Pilate, and he was crucified.

The word of God has always confronted the rulers of this world. We can't keep it behind the plate glass doors in the warmth of the fellowship. Well, let's turn now to this chapter and see how Amos's words probe the corruption in society in Israel and Judah in 760 BC.

And I hope this will help us to think about our own society as well. Let's notice first the form of words that the prophet chooses. It's full of foreboding. Woe, he says at the beginning.

Woe to those who are at ease in Zion, in verse 1. And then verse 4. Woe to those who lie on beds of ivory. He had used just the same expression back in chapter 5, verse 18.

[12:35] Woe to you who desire the day of the Lord. And it's a fairly common form of speech in the Old Testament prophets. You'll find quite a bit of it in Isaiah and Jeremiah and one or two of the others.

But Jesus, of course, uses it too. For example, in Matthew 23, he says, Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites. In Luke chapter 6, he says, Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets.

So when woe is pronounced like this, it's an announcement of doom. An announcement that God's judgment is coming upon those who act in a certain way if they are unwilling to repent.

Well, what are the attitudes and lifestyles on which Amos pronounces woe in this chapter? First, he addresses the complacency of the nation's leaders.

Now, every nation, of course, needs leadership. And leadership within a nation is part of the God-given order of things. It's part of God's provision for a nation. As the Apostle Paul puts it in Romans 13, there is no authority, meaning national governmental authority, except from God.

[13:48] And those that exist have been instituted by God. God is a God of order. And he orders the life of a nation through responsible leadership. And we know, as we look around the world today, that if a nation does not have effective leadership in place, the door is opened to lawlessness, armed gangs, and terror.

But leadership is a heavy responsibility. And if it's undermined by slackness or complacency, the nation is soon in trouble.

And this is what was happening in Judah and Israel in 760 BC. Look at verse 1. It's dripping with irony. Woe to those who are at ease in Zion.

And to those who feel secure on the mountain of Samaria, the notable men of the first of the nations to whom the house of Israel comes. Now, Amos is ironically echoing the attitudes of these leaders in Jerusalem and Samaria.

You can imagine a news reporter coming and speaking to one of them. Tell us, minister, what is it like being a leader in Israel today? Oh, well, it's simply delightful.

[14:57] It's a bit of a doddle, really. I get up in the morning. I look out of my window over the city stretched in front of me. My butler brings me in my morning paper. And I turn straight to the financial reports.

And the FTSE index is remarkably good, you know. It's over 7,000 points at present in Samaria. I say to my butler, you do realize, Gregory, don't you, that we've never had it so good.

Now, the fact is that in 760 BC, in Samaria, the economy was doing remarkably well. Jeroboam II was the king of Israel. He was shrewd.

He was godless. But he was shrewd. And he was good at economics. He'd had a long reign from 793. And he was going to reign on till 753. And it was a period when the rich people were doing very well and getting richer.

Assyria, the great nation to the north and east, which was going to invade Israel and knock it to pieces some 40 years later, was still half asleep. And there seemed to be no serious threat to national security.

[16:00] But Amos, as a prophet, was privy to the Lord's purposes. He had said back in chapter 3, verse 7, the Lord does nothing without revealing his secret to his servants, the prophets.

So Amos knew that God was going to punish Israel. And he knew that the punishment was going to come in the form of military invasion and the demolition of cities and exile for the people.

Total national disaster was on its way. And this is why the message of verses 2 and 3 follows the message of verse 1. In verse 1, he's saying to the leaders, you are foolish to feel secure and complacent because the truth is you're not secure.

You're in very grave danger of being destroyed. Now, verses 2 and 3, especially the end of verse 2, is grammatically difficult. And, well, it's almost incomprehensible, actually, the end of verse 2 as it's put in our ESV.

So let me read verses 2 and 3 in a modern paraphrase, which I think brings out the force of them better. Amos says, go over to Calne and see what happened there. Then go to the great city of Hamath.

[17:10] Then on down to the Philistine city of Gath. You are no better than they were. And look at how they were destroyed. You push away every thought of coming disaster. But your actions only bring the day of judgment closer.

So do you see what he's saying to the nation's leaders? He's saying, read recent history. Haven't you heard about Calne? Calne was a great city. Calne actually was founded by Nimrod.

You'll see the story of that in Genesis 10. Then Hamath, known as Hamath the Great. That was a city up in Syria. And Gath. Gath was a powerful Philistine city. But they've all been knocked flat. And Amos is saying, do you think that Jerusalem and Samaria are exempt from this kind of treatment? Now the problem which Amos and all the Old Testament writers unerringly identify is national apostasy.

Sin. Turning away from the Lord. If, in the words of chapter 5, verse 6, the nation will again seek the Lord, it will live.

[18:15] But if it refuses to seek him, he will, in the same verse, break out like fire in the house of Joseph. And the fire will devour with none to quench it. Now let's think for a moment about our own nation to draw some parallels.

Think of Britain in 2015 AD. Look at verse 1. Do we, in Scotland and England, feel ease and security?

The FTSE 100 index of stocks and shares is at over 7,000 at the moment. Did you know that? The highest it's ever been in all its 40-something years of existence.

The national economy today, having struggled badly for about the last six years, is apparently making progress again. But we sense, to misquote Shakespeare, that in the state of Denmark, something is rotten, don't we?

Just to give one example. Last Wednesday, I was listening to the news in the evening and the news broke that Barclays Bank and the Royal Bank of Scotland and the famous American investment bank, J.P. Morgan, were fined a total of 3.6 billion pounds for colluding to tamper with foreign exchange rates.

[19:33] And one suspects that that is but the tip of an iceberg. There was one financial dealer quoted on the news as saying about banking, If you ain't cheating, you ain't trying.

In other words, for your financial institution to get ahead and to stay ahead, you've simply got to break the rules. There's no place for you in this cutthroat culture if you're not willing to cheat. Now, I'm not wanting to be a scaremonger, but I am wanting us to think about the implications of Amos's words. His message to Israel was, There is a cast-iron link between godliness and national security.

Now, surely one reason why Britain has been a strong and influential nation for a long time is that we have, for centuries, honoured the Lord and the Bible in national life, until the second half of the 20th century.

But looking at that phrase in verse 1, Have we not, I'm talking about the British here, the Iranians and others, you listen in, I'm talking really to the British here, Have we not, rather smugly, thought of ourselves as the first of the nations?

[20 : 45] Or if not the first, then at least amongst the first of the nations. We've prided ourselves on having so many fine things. Our ancient, wonderful universities, great literature and art and music, world leaders in science and medicine and engineering.

And we're the originators of all the great world sports, aren't we? All of them. Football, rugby, golf, tennis, cricket. All British. Even the Americans, who are the first of the nations, they love to hear our beautiful British accents, don't we?

When we go and speak to them. And that's to do with history, surely, isn't it? Because Britain represents something deeply old and enduring to a much younger nation, which has a shorter history.

Haven't we thought of ourselves as the first amongst the nations? But we'd better be careful. If we still sense that we're among the first of the nations, it might be wise for us to think of the fate of Calne and Hamath the Great and Gath of the Philistines.

Or thinking today of Damascus and Tripoli and the cities of Iraq. Friends, we need to keep preaching the gospel.

[21 : 58] We need to be re-evangelizing this nation, which has so foolishly turned away from the gospel and from the ethics of the gospel. Amos teaches us that there is a cast-iron link between godliness and national security.

Well, if that's the first thing he addresses here, the complacency of the nation's leaders, secondly, he addresses their thoughtless self-indulgence.

Verse 4. Woe to those who lie on beds of ivory and stretch themselves out on their couches and eat lambs from the flock and calves from the midst of the stall, who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp, and like David, invent for themselves instruments of music, who drink wine in bowls and anoint themselves with the finest of oils, but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph.

Now, taking it from verse 4, just look at these different things that he criticizes. Amos is not saying that we should not possess beds and couches.

We do need them. He's not saying that we shouldn't stretch ourselves when we feel the need for a stretch coming on. He's not saying that it's godless to eat lamb or beef.

[23 : 11] He's not banning singing or harps or other musical instruments. He's not saying that we should never drink wine or that we should never put on a dab of aftershave or ex...

ex... I sometimes see in my bathroom something called exfoliating ointment. Now, this, friends, is a mystery to me.

If I knew what my foliates were, I'd be falling over myself to exfoliate them. Perhaps somebody could enlighten me after the service. I've got quite a long way into life without needing exfoliation daily.

Now, you'll see what I'm saying. The things that Amos is referring to in this section are not sinful in themselves. The problem is the attitudes of those who are using them.

The whole paragraph is full of a sense of decadence and self-indulgence. These beds are not just ordinary, purposeful beds like an Ikea bed. They're made of ivory. Or at least they've got ivory trimmings.

[24 : 12] And this stretching, which comes in verse 4, and you'll see it's repeated in verse 7, it's not just the sort of stretch you have first thing in the morning, now have breakfast and get to work. No. It's about people who have a lot of money and no work to do, and they're still lounging about on their chaise longs at 2 o'clock in the afternoon.

Remember the old song, Lazy Bones, Lion in the Sun? How are you going to get your day's work done? Lion in the noonday sun. It's that sort of thing, isn't it?

And what about the lambs and the calves? Poor people, and most of them would have been poor in Israel, would have been fortunate to eat meat once a year. But these idle, yawning stretchers seem to have meat all the time.

And then verse 5, music. They're very, very musical, but Amos is stinging them. His reference to David here surely is ironic, because David was musically purposeful.

He played the harp, he wrote wonderful songs, which are now our psalms. His music was a gift to Israel and a gift to the Christian church. But Amos is saying to these people, you fancy yourselves as mini-Davids, don't you?

[25 : 23] Pleased with your musicianship. In fact, you've got so much time on your lazy hands that you're inventing new musical instruments. But you're not like David at all. Your songs are not purposeful or edifying, they're idle songs.

Then verse 6, they're frequently getting drunk, taking wine, not in modest or small amounts, in a glass or a cup, they're drinking it in bowls. What he means is by the bowlful.

And they're anointing themselves with the finest of oils, perfumes, fragrances, and all sorts of things. But, and it's these final words of Amos 6 which really apply Amos's scalpel, but they are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph.

That is God's charge against them. That's where the knife goes in. That's one of the most important verses in this book. They are giving themselves over to this luxurious sensuality.

But the fact that Joseph, which means Israel, has become a spiritual ruin is something that passes them by, something to which they are supremely indifferent. Amos is grieved, God is grieved, over the ruin of Joseph.

[26 : 38] God is grieved over the ruinous state of his beloved people, Israel. God, of course, was angry with them, but he was also heartbroken. Jesus reflects the same thing.

He was angry with those who resisted him, but he was also deeply grieved. Remember him coming to the city of Jerusalem in his final days. And as he stood above the city on the hill and looked over it, he wept because their hearts were so hard.

They didn't even recognize the king of Israel when he came to them. And I don't have to remind you of the only crown that they ever gave him on earth. But verses 4, 5, and 6, in so many ways, they describe our own culture today because our culture is a culture of pampering the body, an idolizing of leisure, an idolatry of music, and an overindulgence of food and alcohol.

I hardly need press this home because we're all so familiar with it, but Amos forces us to recognize this, so I'll just touch lightly on it. Leisure. Let's think of that. Stretching out on the couch.

Leisure has become an important godlet, a little god. When you listen to the radio on a Friday, every week, the presenters of all the programs are unable to contain their glee that it's Friday, and therefore, the glorious weekend is about to begin.

[28 : 03] One's attitude to work, therefore, becomes undermined. Delivering really good service to the customer becomes much less important than the pay packet and the time off.

Food and drink, of course, has become a major godlet. Have you noticed a fairly new restaurant just down in this direction called Tony Macaroni's? You see, it's been there for two or three years. I haven't been there yet. I must try it out. But have a look at the slogan on the window. I don't speak Italian, but I think I've got enough Italian to know that the slogan says live to eat.

Somebody give it to me in Italian. Okay. Have a look at it when you're next down there. But I'm sure that's what it means, live to eat. Now, that reverses the Bible's order.

The Bible says eat to live, eat to work, eat to build up the kingdom of God. But our culture is now saying that the purpose of living is to eat. Think of our supermarkets and the way they cover their walls now with great big pictures which really are a kind of food pornography.

[29 : 07] You walk in there and you see a huge photograph of a joint of roast lamb or beef. The carving knife is just going into it, isn't it? The juices are dripping off the knife.

And behind the meat you can see in camera soft focus, very artistic, you see the roasted potatoes and carrots and Brussels sprouts, not cooked to oblivion like the way they used to be at school and mushy but green, al dente.

Then Amos mentions music in verse 5. Music has become a major godlet in our culture. Music in itself is a beautiful gift from God to the human race.

It expands our hearts, it develops our sensitivities, it binds us together in friendship, it even helps us to understand history better. For example, if you listen to some of the music composed during the Reformation, you'll understand more about the turmoils of the Reformation.

Music is wonderful but it so easily becomes an idol. Forty odd years ago there was a famous American band called The Doors.

[30 : 16] They had a lead singer called Jim Morrison who had a very powerful and persuasive kind of voice. He died very young. One of their famous tracks was called When the Music's Over and the main lyric was When the Music's Over turn out the lights.

In other words, if there's no music life is not worth living. So in verses 4, 5 and 6 we have Amos' pained description of Israelite society just 40 years before Israel was demolished by the Assyrians. A pampered and self-indulgent society who had given themselves up to leisure, to food, to alcohol, to music, to perfumes, to partying.

But they had lost the capacity to grieve over the ruin of the people of God. They had plenty of religion, burnt offerings, singing, harps, but they had lost the knowledge of God.

So what is their sentence from the Lord? Verse 7 tells us, Therefore, they shall now be the first of those who go into exile and the revelry of those who stretch themselves out shall pass away.

[31 : 28] Just notice the word first there. They shall now be the first of those who go into exile. It looks back to verse 1 with irony. The notable men are the ones who want to be first. Well, they will be, says the Lord.

They shall be the first to go into exile. And as for the party, the revelry, it shall pass away, says verse 7. The loudspeakers will be silent.

The musical instruments will lie broken in the streets. The barrels and the bottles will all be smashed. Silence. It will all have gone. And verse 8 drives the point home with fearsome emphasis, with an oath from God.

The Lord God has sworn, by himself declares the Lord, the God of hosts. I abhor the pride of Jacob and I hate his strongholds and I will deliver up the city and all that is in it.

The Lord hates these things, the pride, the strongholds, the great fortified houses, the palaces of the rich Israelites who care nothing for the ruin of Joseph. Now we'll return to verses 9 and 10 in just a moment, but let's look briefly at verses 11 to 14 first, where the Lord rubs home to the Israelites the reasons for the terrible chastising that he's about to bring on them.

[32 : 44] Verse 11 makes the point that rich and poor alike will be punished. The great house, that's the rich man's mansion, will be smashed to fragments, but the little house too, the poor man's cottage, will be reduced to rubble.

Then Amos launches out two colourful countrymen's questions. Do horses gallop up over rocks? Answer, of course not stupid. Can you plough the sea with oxen?

That's perhaps the more likely translation. Well, if you tried, you'd be stupid. Well, says Amos, if you want stupidity, look at the way you're behaving. The law courts should have the sweet savour of justice about them, but you've filled them with the bitter poison of injustice.

Your lives should be producing the lovely fruit of righteousness and godliness, but all you're producing is wormwood, the bitter fruit of sin. And look at your further stupidity.

In verse 13, you're rejoicing over your recent military successes. Now, if you just look at those words in verse 13, Jeroboam II had won two minor military victories recently at places called Lodebar and Karneim.

[33 : 56] And the Israelites were rather flexing their muscles and feeling unstoppable. But Amos is saying, is speaking to them as if they were a rugby team who have just beaten a village third 15 and now think they can take on the all blacks.

Don't deceive yourselves, Amos is saying, because the Lord, verse 14, is going to raise up against you a nation so strong that they will oppress you all the way from Lebo Hamath right up in Syria near Hamath the Great right down to the brook of Araba in the south almost to the Nile.

Like for us, John O'Groats to Gretna Green. Now, verses 9 and 10. In those verses, Amos pictures a scene in an Israelite house after the judgment has taken place after the Assyrian army has swept through destroying everything.

Look at verse 9. Ten men have managed to find refuge in one house. They've managed to hide from the conqueror. Now, this happens, doesn't it, in times of invasion.

A few people manage to slip off and hide away. Well, here we have ten men in one house, but they are dying one by one from starvation and disease.

[35 : 11] Somebody comes to the house acting as undertaker because he's heard that his relative has died there and he's come to take away the corpse for burial. The fact that the corpse is referred to as the bones suggests that starvation has reduced them to skeletons or almost skeletons.

So the undertaker cautiously enters this house of living death. death. He hears a movement in the back room in the innermost parts of the house. Is someone there?

He cries. Yes, comes a voice. I'm here. Is there still anyone with you? No, I'm the last one. Then the undertaker says, Silence, not a word.

Don't mention the name of the Lord. Why not? Why would you not want to turn to him in that extreme situation of distress?

Well, apparently they don't want to. Amos is showing us that people generally die as they have lived. If they've rejected the Lord throughout their lives, it can be simply too painful, too humbling a thing to turn to him at the end.

[36 : 20] It's a sobering paragraph and a harrowing picture. Well, friends, how can we respond to this message of Amos? Let me suggest three things.

First, let's beware of feeling a false sense of national security. These Israelites felt at ease and secure, as verse 1 puts it.

But Amos said to them, You're not secure because security is the fruit of loving and obeying the Lord. And their nation was neither loving the Lord nor obeying him. Our strong British past is no assurance of a strong British future.

If God was willing to punish Israel for her waywardness, could Britain expect exemption, especially when you think of how much the gospel has been preached in our country over the centuries?

So let's beware of feeling a false sense of national security. Secondly, let's beware of bowing down at the altars of self-indulgence and pampering. This lifestyle of verses 4 and 5 and 6 is so close to the style of our culture in Britain today.

[37 : 28] It is so possible for Christian people to be more concerned for their food and drink and leisure time and bodily comforts than for their friends and neighbours who are strangers to the Lord.

The lure of self-indulgence is powerful. The Lord calls us to live for him, not for Tesco's finest. And then thirdly, from verse 6, let's learn how to grieve over the godlessness of our nation.

Now we are not Israel in the 8th century BC, we're Britain in the 21st century AD and there are not parallels between that culture and our culture at every point.

Now in particular, the churches in Britain are a source of many encouragements as well as many disappointments. There are churches up and down the country, hundreds of them who love the Lord, who honour the Bible and who preach the Gospel.

And work like the work of the UCCF in universities and colleges has had a lot of strength and energy about it in recent years and we should rejoice in it. Now of course there is much to disappoint us in the churches as well.

[38 : 38] Shallowness, denial of the Bible, sometimes downright heresy. But in the spirit of verse 6, let's develop fresh eyes for the nation.

Economically, quite prosperous, like Israel in the 8th century BC, but spiritually in a state of far-reaching dilapidation. It's almost, as you look around Britain, it's almost like looking at a great house which is on the verge of collapsing.

The roof is coming off, the beams are sagging. To many people in Britain, the idea of coming to know the Lord is as strange as the prospect of getting to know the Emperor of Japan.

If you're young, whatever you end up doing by way of a career or a job, give yourself, friends, to the evangelization of the nation, the re-evangelization of Britain.

Live life with the shining integrity of those who love the Lord and your life will be noticed if you live like that because you don't fall in with the prevailing culture of pampering and self-indulgence.

[39 : 46] Love your church in the years that lie in front of you and put yourself out so that your church can be built up and strengthened. I don't just mean this church but any church that you belong to in the future. Let's also learn to step outside the plate glass doors.

Let's learn to grieve over the ruin of Scotland and England and to pray that the Lord that there'll be so many gospel churches raised up by the Lord that the values of the gospel begin to penetrate the strongholds of education and commerce and politics and even banking.

How will we live, therefore? As those who stretch themselves out on their couches eating the choicest foods, singing idle songs, drinking wine by the bowlful and pampering our bodies with the finest ingredients, or as those who, because we've learned to grieve over the ruins, preach the good news of Jesus Christ, our wonderful Savior, the only one who can rescue us from the wrath to come.

Let's bow our heads and we'll pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Dear God, our Father, we do want to thank you again for this man, Amos, and for the way that he loved Israel and loved Judah, even though he had to announce this very hard message to them.

We thank you for his vision of a return to you which would bring life and freedom. And our prayer, dear Father, is that you will fill our hearts with the same kind of desire to see our own nation return to you.

[41 : 33] please stir us up and people from many churches, the churches where the Bible is loved and honored, we pray that you will stir up many to enter the muck and the mess of the city and the nation and be prepared to roll up their sleeves and work for you.

And our prayer, dear Father, is that in years to come with the strengthening of the churches and the strengthening of the honor given to the gospel in our nation, we will see great change and great glory brought to your name.

We ask it for Jesus' sake. Amen.