

When Courage is Required

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[0 : 00] Well friends, we turn now to our Bible reading, which you'll find in our big church Bibles on page 769, page 769.

And I'm reading from the prophet Amos, and tonight we have chapter 7, page 769, Amos chapter 7. And in this chapter we have three visions given by the Lord to Amos, and then we have the accounts of an encounter, a meeting between Amos the prophet and Amaziah the priest of Bethel. So Amos chapter 7. This is what the Lord God showed me. Behold, he was forming locusts when the latter growth was just beginning to sprout, and behold, it was the latter growth after the king's mowings.

When they had finished eating the grass of the land, I said, O Lord God, please forgive. How can Jacob stand? He is so small. The Lord relented concerning this.

[1 : 13] It shall not be, said the Lord. This is what the Lord God showed me. Behold, the Lord God was calling for a judgment by fire, and it devoured the great deep and was eating up the land.

Then I said, O Lord God, please cease. How can Jacob stand? He is so small. The Lord relented concerning this. This also shall not be, said the Lord God.

This is what he showed me. Behold, the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in his hand. And the Lord said to me, Amos, what do you see?

And I said, A plumb line. Then the Lord said, Behold, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel. I will never again pass by them.

The high places of Isaac shall be made desolate. The high places of Isaac shall be made desolate, and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste. And I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword.

[2 : 17] Then Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, sent to Jeroboam, king of Israel, saying, Amos has conspired against you in the midst of the house of Israel.

The land is not able to bear all his words. For thus Amos has said, Jeroboam shall die by the sword, and Israel must go into exile away from his land.

And Amaziah said to Amos, O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, and eat bread there, and prophesy there. But never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom.

Then Amos answered and said to Amaziah, I was no prophet nor a prophet's son, but I was a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore figs. But the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, Go, prophesy to my people Israel.

Now therefore hear the word of the Lord. You say, Do not prophesy against Israel, and do not preach against the house of Isaac. Therefore thus says the Lord, Your wife shall be a prostitute in the city, and your sons and your daughters shall fall by the sword, and your land shall be divided up with a measuring line.

[3 : 36] You yourself shall die in an unclean land, and Israel shall surely go into exile away from its land. This is the word of the Lord, and may the Lord bless it to us this evening.

Let's turn again to Amos chapter 7, on page 769. My title for this evening is When Courage is Required.

Human words can be very weak and insubstantial, or they can be very powerful.

Here's an example of weak and insubstantial words. You look at your friend's blog, and he writes this. This morning I got up at 7 o'clock. The sky was blue, though I could see some clouds.

After breakfast I looked out of the kitchen window, and only five cars drove past between 7.30 and 7.45. Four of these were silver, one was red.

[4 : 52] Then I went to work. Now if you read a blog like that, you probably would never want to read that man's blog again, because the message was so uninteresting.

Reading that kind of thing is a complete waste of time. Writing that kind of thing is a complete waste of time. But at the other end of the spectrum, if you were to go out into Buchanan Street, or Socky Hall Street on a Saturday morning, as some of our open air preachers do, and if you were to say to the passing crowds, Jesus Christ is the only way to salvation, come to him and be saved.

If you reject him, you'll be rejected and lost. If you were to pass on that message in public and develop it a bit, you would be saying something both powerful and wonderful and true and divisive. Your words would be opening up God's message to the world, and some people listening to that message would bless you in their hearts and thank God for your words, while other people would be reaching into their shopping baskets for eggs and tomatoes to throw at you.

Now, Amos chapter 7 is about words. It's about the words that God gave Amos to say, and it's also about a man who opposed Amos's words with fierce antagonism, this man called Amaziah, the priest of Bethel.

[6 : 13] And I trust it will do us good to see how Amos stood up to this man with courage. Courage was required, and courage was shown, and it was shown through words.

So I want to spend most of our time this evening in verses 10 to 17. It's a unique passage within the book of Amos because it is a short piece of historical narrative.

All the rest of the book is a record of Amos's prophecies, excerpts from his sermons or his oracles. But this one little piece in chapter 7 records an event, a conversation, between Amos the prophet and Amaziah the priest.

You might almost say, in the red corner, Amos the prophet. In the blue corner, Amaziah the priest of Bethel. But we'll look first briefly at verses 1 to 9, which we might call three disturbing visions.

In the Old Testament, the prophet is primarily a speaker, someone who speaks what God gives him to say. But he's not only one who speaks, he's also one who sees.

[7 : 18] In fact, Amaziah, you'll see in verse 12, addresses him as a seer. Seer is a rather strange word, and we don't use it very much, but it simply means one who sees, a seer.

The prophet Samuel, back in the first book of Samuel, is described as the seer. So the Old Testament prophet speaks God's words, but also sometimes sees visions.

So the prophet will typically say, thus says the Lord, as he does in this chapter at verse 17. But he will also sometimes say, this is what the Lord God showed me, as he does in this chapter at verse 1, and again at verse 4, and again at verse 7.

And you'll see that the first verse of chapter 8 is in the same mode. So the Lord God reveals his mind and purpose to the prophet, not only verbally, but visually. Now there's much more word than there is vision, but the prophetic visions add interesting details.

And just notice how specific Amos is about the origin of his visions. Look at verse 1. This is what the Lord God showed me. In other words, this is not the product of my fertile imagination.

[8 : 30] This is a vision sent from heaven, and therefore it carries authority, because it comes from God. So what does the first vision show? Locusts being formed by the Lord.

I think of those little green grasshoppers that we see in our countryside in the summer. Harmless, cheerful, small, barely an inch long, just about like that. Now a locust is built exactly like a grasshopper, except that he's brown, he's much bigger, and he's very hungry, and when he comes, he arrives in great swarms, with many hundreds of thousands of his cousins.

And a swarm of locusts, we just don't know them in this country, but some of you perhaps will come from countries where they come. A swarm of locusts can devastate huge acreages of crops.

They strip off everything that is green and edible. So it's disastrous for farmers, and disastrous for the economy. And verse 1 tells us that the Lord God was forming these locusts, not in the winter, when they couldn't do much harm, but in the early summer.

The first cut of grass has been taken, just about this time of year, I guess. And the second crop, what is called the latter growth, is just beginning to sprout. And in verse 2, these locusts eat up every blade of grass in the land.

[9 : 50] And Amos is almost in tears. Oh Lord God, he cries out in verse 2, please forgive. How can Jacob stand? He's so small. Jacob, of course, means Israel.

And what Amos notices here is not Israel's sinfulness, but Israel's smallness. The nation has been reduced to a pathetic little shadow of its former self.

He is so small. You can feel the compassion there in Amos' voice. He has to announce the Lord's judgment on Israel, but behind his necessary denunciations, there's pity and deep concern. He cares about these people, whose doom he can so clearly foresee. And the Lord, full of compassion, responds to Amos' prayer and stays his hand.

He does not send the locusts, so the vision does not become reality. Then Amos receives a second vision. If anything, even worse, even more devastating.

[10:49] Locusts are bad enough, but a bushfire or forest fire is far worse. And in this vision, the fire devours the ocean and then it comes streaming out across the land as well.

And again, Amos cries out. And again, the Lord responds by withholding the dreadful punishment. But the third vision, beginning at verse 7, is different.

Not a terrifying plague or destruction, just a simple builder's tool, a plumb line, a piece of lead dangling at the end of a piece of string, an elementary device for measuring whether a wall is properly vertical or squint.

And in the vision in verse 7, it's the Lord who is holding the plumb line, the Lord who is measuring Israel. He's testing to see whether Israel is straight or crooked.

And the plumb line reveals their crookedness. But this time, you'll see Amos does not plead with God to spare Israel. He waits quietly for the Lord's interpretation of the vision.

[11:55] Behold, says the Lord, verse 8, I'm setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel. I will never again pass by them. The high places of Isaac shall be made desolate and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste.

And I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword. I will never again pass by them. Now that phrase takes us back nearly 700 years to the book of Exodus, to the night of the Passover. Because then, the Lord did pass by or pass over. the Israelite houses. He spared the Israelites. But he's telling Amos that now, the judgment is about to fall.

A point of no return has been reached. God has made up his mind. Now these three visions, coming one after the other like this, show us something very important about God's character. That he is forbearing and compassionate, patient, patient, but not endlessly, patient. Paul the Apostle speaks of him like this in Romans chapter 2.

[13:02] Do you presume on the riches of God's kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? But because of your hard and impenitent heart, you're stirring up wrath, storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed.

Now in Amos' day, God had been patient for decades, for centuries even. But in verse 9 here, he tells Amos of the desolation, the destruction that he is now about to bring on his people because of their hard and impenitent hearts.

It's a warning not to trifle with such a God. Well, let's turn now to verse 10. In verse 10, Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, sends a message to Jeroboam, who is the king of Israel.

And he says, Amos has conspired against you in the midst of the house of Israel. The land is not able to bear all his words. For thus Amos has said, Jeroboam shall die by the sword and Israel must go into exile away from his land.

And you'll see that the contents of verse 11 approximately reproduce what the Lord has said privately to Amos in verses 8 and 9, especially the fact that the sword of war is going to attack Jeroboam.

[14:25] So it's very clear that what the Lord God revealed to Amos in verses 1 to 9, Amos then publicly broadcast in the streets of Bethel in Israel.

Amaziah might have been listening to Amos directly, or perhaps somebody else had heard what Amos was saying out in public and then relayed the message to Amaziah. Amos, however it happened, Amos' words came to Amaziah's ears and Amaziah did not like what he heard.

Now here's a question. If you had been in Amos' shoes when he saw those three visions and especially when he'd heard the fearsome message of verses 8 and 9, would you have passed on that message in public?

Would you have broadcast it? To broadcast that message was high-risk ministry. I think I would have been tempted to leg it out of town with the speed of an antelope. But Amos stayed there and he said it.

And this powerful priest, Amaziah, heard it and quickly passed the message on to the powerful and godless king, Jeroboam. Amos is Mr. Courage.

[15:38] But just turn back for a moment to chapter 3, verses 7 and 8, as a reminder of what lies behind the whole prophet's way of life.

Chapter 3, verse 7. The Lord God does nothing without revealing his secret to his servants, the prophets. The lion has roared, who will not fear?

The Lord God has spoken, who can but prophesy? In other words, the Lord God has revealed his plan, in this case, his plan and purpose to judge Israel, and he's revealed it to this particular prophet, to Amos, and therefore, the prophet must speak.

He cannot keep it to himself. The Lord God has not revealed his secret to the prophet, for the prophet then to lock it away in the secrecy of his own heart. It must be broadcast. The Lord God has spoken, who can but prophesy?

Well, I want to, back to chapter 7, I want to take verses 10 to 17 now under two headings. First, the tactics of God's enemy, in verses 10 to 13, and then secondly, the determination of God's servant, in verses 14 to 17.

[16:51] First then, the tactics of God's enemy. Amaziah the priest is clearly a senior establishment figure, a cleric who has the ear of the king.

And you'll see he's called there in verse 10, the priest of Bethel, which sounds like a rather dignified title. A little bit like you might find in England, the dean of St. Paul's, or the bishop of Bury St. Edmunds.

Bethel was, you may remember from Genesis, was the place where Jacob, fleeing from his brother Esau, spent the night. And he lay down there and he put his head on a rock and he had a dream, the dream of Jacob's ladder, with angels ascending and descending to heaven.

And the following day, he called the place Bethel, which means the house of God. So in Israel's history, Bethel was a place with a lot of history. But much later on, about 160 years before Amos' day, Jeroboam I set up a golden calf at Bethel and made a shrine for it.

So Bethel became a center of idolatry closely associated with the king, which is why Amaziah describes the place rather grandly in verse 13 as the king's sanctuary and a temple of the kingdom.

[18:10] So I don't think it's unfair to characterize Amaziah as a dignified, rather self-important, priestly figure who is closely associated with the king.

There's a sense in which church and state are well bonded in the person of Amaziah. So imagine this man, full of the dignity of his position, sitting in his vestry one morning at the shrine of Bethel, drinking his coffee and doing the times crossword.

And a messenger bursts in to see him. Your grace, says the messenger, I've been sent to tell you what Amos has been saying. You know, that mad cat preacher that's come up from Judah. He's been on his soapbox in the marketplace this morning.

Oh yes, and what has he been saying? Well, it's awful, it's awful. He's been undermining the king's person and dignity. And he's been undermining the dignity of our beloved religion and indeed of your own person, your grace.

Oh, well what exactly has he been saying then? Well, I've got it written down here on paper, your grace. I'll read it out to you word for word. He said, the high places of Isaac shall be made desolate and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste.

[19:22] If I'm not mistaken, your grace, that's an attack on our religion. And he also said, I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword. Oh, did he?

Huh. Well, I'm going to send word to the king about this because he needs to know about this attack on his royal majesty. And before this day ends, we will send this carbuncle of a prophet back to Judah where he belongs.

The one thing that Amaziah appears not to consider for a moment is the possibility that Amos might be telling the truth. Now, let's look more closely at the way in which Amaziah opposes the word of God because this kind of tactic is reproduced in every generation, I guess.

Let's see how he opposes the message. First, Amaziah misrepresents the truth about Amos. Verse 10, part of his message to the king.

He says, Amos has conspired against you. Now, conspiracy implies a group of people who've got together to hatch a plot. But there's no evidence that Amos was conspiring with anybody.

[20 : 33] So that's misrepresentation number one. It makes the opposition look fiercer than it really is. Misrepresentation number two is the suggestion that Amos is personally hostile to the king.

This comes out in verse 10 and in verse 11. In verse 10, Amaziah sends message to the king, Amos has conspired against you as though there is a personal vendetta between Amos and the king, which there is not.

And verse 11, Amaziah says, for thus Amos has said, Jeroboam shall die. As though Amos is personally sentencing the king to death, delivering a kind of fatwa.

But what Amos actually said is there at the end of verse 9. I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword. But who is the I? Well, it's God, isn't it?

It's not Amos. Verses 8 and 9 record what the Lord is saying through Amos. It's not the prophet who is sentencing the king to death. It's the Lord who is pronouncing judgment upon him. So Amaziah misrepresents the truth about Amos to the king.

[21 : 43] Why? So as to stir up the king's hostility towards the prophet. If the king can be made to think that Amos is conspiring against him, which he isn't, and sentencing him to death on his own authority, which he isn't, well, of course, the king is going to be mightily displeased with this man of Judah.

And one of the best ways of persecuting true religion is to stir up the hostility of the government towards the truth. Amaziah depicts Amos as a threat to national welfare.

Look at the final words there in verse 10. The land is not able to bear all his words, for thus Amos has said, Jeroboam shall die by the sword, and Israel must go into exile, away from his land.

Now what is the king going to think about that part of Amaziah's message? Well, if the king cares at all about his people, he's going to be very worried on their account. This is dreadful, he'll think.

Amos is upsetting the population. His sermons are unbearable. The land is not able to bear all his words. He's telling the people that they're all going into exile. And what's that going to do for national morale?

[22 : 58] The children won't sleep at night for fear. Amos will undermine the morale of the army. The soldiers will be quaking in their boots, wondering when they're going to be attacked. So it's a cunning tactic, isn't it?

Suggest that the word of God is undermining national life in some way. can be quite powerful. I think we can draw a parallel with things that happen in our country today.

Churches like ours, churches that are based on and put their trust in the Bible as the word of God, are sometimes branded as fundamentalist or extremist. Now, in reality, we stand in the classic tradition of Bible-believing evangelicalism.

But because we hold that the Bible is true and that Jesus is the only way to God and to salvation. And because we hold to the Bible's teaching on sexual ethics, we're regarded by some people as not having the nation's best interests at heart.

And those who call us extremists will even sometimes bracket us with Islamic extremists, hinting that we might start going in for suicide bombing, as though our aim might be to kill and to maim rather than to bring life-saving good news to the nation.

[24 : 15] So this is part of Amaziah's attack on Amos. The word of God is a threat to the nation's welfare and morale. Then thirdly, in verse 12, Amaziah offers Amos a flattering alternative sphere of work.

So he says to the prophet in verse 12, O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah and eat bread there and prophesy there. Now that must have brought a temptation to Amos.

Think of it, he was away from home and he was very much at the sharp end at this point. He was feeling the pressure of being massively unpopular. Go back to the land of Judah, says Amaziah.

Oh, Judah, beautiful, sweet Judah, land of my fathers, back to my sheep, back to my fig trees, back to peace and serenity. What a lovely prospect. There might have been a financial temptation as well.

The temptation of a secure income. Eat bread there, says the priest. You'll be better fed there and prophesy there. The people of Judah will surely be very happy to hear you denouncing the land of Israel.

[25 : 27] They'll pay you well to hear that kind of preaching. You'll have a big fresh loaf of bread every day back in Judah. All you're likely to get here in Israel is a stale crust and a few curses. But they're in Judah.

And then look at the verb Amaziah uses in verse 12. Flee away. Take flight. That's probably just what Amos felt like doing at that stage.

Strapping on his running spikes and legging it for Judah. Now this is the kind of pressure that can come upon a person who stands firm for the word of God. Not least for Christian ministers.

The pressure to up anchor and go away to a more congenial environment where the pay is better, the home comforts are more appealing, or the people are perhaps more ready to listen appreciatively.

Well here's the temptation coming to Amos. Run away. Run away. And there's flattery in it. Amaziah calls Amos seer in verse 12.

[26 : 29] Not idiot. And it's rather a compliment this suggestion that Amos might have a perfectly appropriate ministry in Judah. But then forth, Amaziah effectively ejects Amos from Bethel.

Look at verse 13. But never again prophesy at Bethel for it is the king's sanctuary and it is a temple of the kingdom. In modern terms here, this priest is bringing down upon Amos the full weight of church and state.

We have the sanctuary of the king and the temple of the kingdom. The highest symbols of religious life allied to the focal figure of political power.

Isn't it ironic then that at this supposedly high point of religious life, the one thing Amaziah will not permit is the voice of the prophet.

Religion, yes, let's have plenty of that, political power, yes, certainly, but the voice of God, not on your life. It's somehow very hard for the ear of the establishment, establishment with a capital E, to listen to the word of God.

[27 : 46] Not impossible, thank God, but very hard. Amaziah the priest and Jeroboam the king represent the alliance of political and religious power in the nation.

They are the leaders of the establishment. Why is it that the establishment in a nation tends to be death to the word of God? Well, one reason is the corrupting influence of power and prestige.

Amaziah is obviously close to the king. The king is his friend. And Amaziah is defending and protecting the king against this dangerous subversive prophet.

And why is Amaziah so concerned for the king's honor? Well, surely because the king is his patron. The king is his defender. His post at Bethel is in the gift of the king.

Royal patronage is very beneficial to one's lifestyle. You can be pretty sure that Amaziah wore clothes of the finest cloth and rode the best donkeys and had the best wines in his cellar.

[28 : 48] And look at the pride and pomposity there in verse 13. Bethel is such an important place and I am such an important official.

When the religious establishment is in the pocket of the political establishment, it is bound to lose its teeth. You don't speak out against those who feather your nest and promote your lifestyle.

Let me give one example of this. Some years ago, I heard of a senior bishop in the Church of England who said this, I'm never going to speak out against homosexual practice in my diocese because I want a peerage when I retire.

So a peerage becomes more important than obeying the word of God. That man got his peerage. That's the corrupting influence of power and prestige.

prestige. Let's not be surprised to find that the word of God is unpopular with the establishment. Let's pray then for our members of parliament who are real Christians.

[29 : 59] And there are some, and we know that. And it's great that they're there. It's always going to be tough for them to take their stand on the word of God. The word of God is so challenging to the world and to the worldly church.

And therefore it will be widely hated as will those who preach it and stand by it. That's why Amos was so vilified here by Amaziah. But to people like Amos who stand by the word of God, Jesus has some real comfort to offer.

Remember his words in John's gospel? If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. Hatred of God's word and of those who stand by it is truly hatred of Jesus himself.

So we're in good company if we're hated for our allegiance to the word of God. God's enemy. Well, we've seen something of the tactics of God's enemy. Let's notice secondly, the determination of God's servant in verses 14 to 17.

Amos' behavior here is not just for us to admire from a safe distance, it's for us to follow and imitate. So let's see how he answers Amaziah.

[31 : 13] first, he locates his authority in God's commission to him to speak to Israel. Verse 14, Amos answered and said to Amaziah, I was no prophet nor a prophet's son, but I was a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore figs.

But the Lord took me from following the flock and the Lord said to me, go prophesy to my people Israel. Now this claim of Amos, that he's been called by God to prophesy, comes out of him in extreme circumstances.

He is in the pressure cooker at this moment. He's not presenting his CV to a would-be employer. No, in the teeth of fierce antagonism, he's telling Amaziah that he is speaking his message to Israel because God has called him and has authorized him.

So Amaziah may not care for the true God of Israel, but Amos does, and he's obeying his commission to preach in Israel. It is God, Amos is saying, who authorizes the message.

So much so that these sermons or utterances of Amos are not the words of Amos, they are truly the words of God. Now it's a very brief account of a prophetic call.

[32 : 29] We have slightly longer ones when you look at Isaiah and Jeremiah, for example. But the details here are full of interest. He says in verse 14, I was no prophet nor a prophet's son.

There is evidence that in Israel in those days there were groups of prophets. You might call them guilds of prophets, professional paid prophets who worked together in groups and may well have been linked to the national establishment, almost like groups of monks or friars or perhaps seminary students.

Amos is saying to Amaziah, I don't come from that kind of background at all. I'm not one of your prophetic professionals. I've come from a completely different way of life.

I've spent my life shearing sheep and pruning fig trees up to now. He's not saying I'm just a simple country bumpkin with straw coming out of my hat.

He's not saying that. He's just saying I don't come from the professional schools. I'm not trained. I grew up to be a farmer, not a preacher. But the Lord laid his hand on me and called me from farming to prophesy to the people of Israel.

[33 : 38] And that is why you should listen to me. I'm not a person of any account in myself, but what I bring to you is the word of God, and you should listen to him. Now this sheds light on the role of the Bible preacher today.

The preacher, of course, today is not a prophet in the way that Amos was, because the Christian preacher is not a channel of new revelation. But the preacher teaches God's words, and that's why we should listen to him.

He's not a person of importance in himself, he's only a servant, and sometimes he can be decidedly dull. But if he's preaching the Bible, rather than just his own opinions, he can expect people to listen, not because of his words, but because he's teaching the Lord's words.

Now this is why Amos is able to be so bold. His message is not from the farmer and stock breeder annual or from the ploughman's weekly. It's from the creator of the universe, the God who rescued Israel from Egypt.

Israel must listen to their creator because they belong to him by covenant. So there's the first thing. Amos' authority lies in God's commission.

[34 : 49] temptation. And then second, Amos exemplifies the believer's courage. Now we mustn't confuse courage with rudeness.

There's nothing in this passage that suggests that Amos shouted at Amaziah or stamped his foot or growled at him. Amos has many strong things to say in the course of his nine chapters, but his tone is one of grief and lament.

He says back in chapter 5, verse 1, hear this word that I take up over you in lamentation, O house of Israel. And in chapter 6, verse 6, we saw this last week, he speaks with sorrow over the leaders of Israel who have lost the capacity to grieve over the ruins of Joseph.

Amos does not speak with a cheap or shrill voice. His prophecies convey the sorrow of the Lord as well as the Lord's anger. So although what Amos says to Amaziah in verses 16 and 17 is at one level so appalling, there's no reason to think that it was said ungraciously or unfeelingly, but it required great courage.

Verse 16, Therefore hear the word of the Lord. You say, do not prophesy against Israel and do not preach against the house of Isaac. Therefore thus says the Lord, your wife shall be a prostitute in the city.

[36 : 14] And your sons and your daughters shall fall by the sword, and your land shall be divided up with a measuring line. You yourself shall die in an unclean land, and Israel shall surely go into exile away from its land.

Now in verse 13, Amaziah has just forbidden Amos to prophesy. Never again prophesy at Bethel. He's just said that. But Amos immediately disregards the ban because he would rather please God than please men.

How do you think he felt when he uttered those devastating words in verse 17? Well, the text doesn't tell us, but surely we can guess. He must have been feeling terrible, heart beating double time, hot and cold in the stomach, blood rising up into his face.

It's a terrible truth to have to announce, even to an enemy. Your wife shall be a prostitute in the city. Why that? Well, surely because Amaziah, the husband, will be taken away to exile, and she will have lost all her income and support.

She'll have no other way of earning her keep. She'll have to turn to prostitution. Then, says Amos, your sons and your daughters shall fall by the sword, cut up by the invading Assyrians.

[37 : 32] Your land shall be divided up with a measuring line. In other words, all this man's property will be confiscated. You yourself shall die in an unclean land, a heathen land far from Israel.

Now, all that is personal to Amaziah and his family, but the last line of the verse is about the nation. And Israel shall surely go into exile away from its land, the very thing that happened only 40 years afterwards.

Now, Amos cannot have been feeling great when he uttered those words. But the point is, he said them. He said them.

Surely he had to use every ounce of courage. A prophet is not a robot or an automaton. The Old Testament prophets are clearly men who are of deep feeling and compassion and understanding. But Amos is honored here for his courage. Courage is not what you exercise when you're feeling bold. Courage is what you do when you're feeling terrible and yet you can see it needs to be done.

[38 : 39] Amos couldn't pronounce such a dreadful judgment from God upon Amaziah without feeling awful. But he did it. He said the words that the Lord had given him to say. And you see, verses 16 and 17 show us how this prophet was not prepared to be silenced.

And there's a great lesson for us in those two verses. Verse 16 records the ban. You say, do not prophesy, do not preach. Therefore, thus says the Lord.

So the ban on speaking is met immediately by the speaking. Isn't that a lesson for us today as well? The world, the world outside, and sometimes the worldly church, will try to gag the word of God, to muffle it.

Don't say these things. Don't give us the Bible's teaching. But the example of Amos bids us take courage and speak. Amos is not prepared to allow God to be gagged.

And neither must we, friends, participate in any way in the gagging of the Bible. We will be put under pressure to do that. But let's be like Amos.

[39 : 51] Let me give just one or two examples of the kind of situations that you and I could easily find ourselves in. You might be sitting on the train tomorrow morning on your way to work, quietly reading your Bible in one corner.

And a fellow passenger looks across the table and says to you, is that the Bible? And you say, yes. He says, how can you possibly read something so outdated?

And you say, it is the most contemporary book in the world. Here's another scenario. Somebody says to you, do you really believe that sex is only for marriage and that marriage is only for a man and a woman?

And you say, yes. He says, but why? This is 2015. You say, because it's the will of God taught in the Bible.

You see, Amos wasn't prepared to be shifted. Neither must we. Here's another scenario.

Somebody says to you, but surely religion is a many-splendored kaleidoscope.

[40 : 57] You reply, by which you mean what? Well, all religions are the same animal inside, surely. They just vary on the outside. So you reply, no.

The Bible teaches that Christ is the only way to God. Is that really believable today? And you say, yes. Friends, those two words, no and yes, are very important words in the Christian's vocabulary. There's no need for us to shout or to stamp or to go red in the face. We can be gracious and gentle and yet firm. But courage is required.

And let's remember always what Jesus said, whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in glory.

That is an incentive to us to live by the words of God and to stand by them. Amos shows us how it's possible to counter the forces that seek to gag the word of God.

[42 : 09] By the grace of God, let's be like him. Let's bow our heads and we'll pray. Dear God, our Father, how gracious you are to give us this wonderful example of courage, standing by your message, not being prepared to shift or to have it gagged.

We're well aware, dear Father, that the voice of Amaziah and those like him will often come to us from the world and from other sources, sometimes very unexpected ones.

But our prayer is that you will help us to be filled with grace and firmness and courage and that you will help us even though we may feel daunted by the prospect.

Help us to be bold and strong, not to be ashamed of any aspect of the Bible's teaching, but to stand by it and to look to you to give us the strength we need. And we ask it in Jesus' name.

Amen. Amen.