

Maclaren on Amos

Amos 3:8 A Pair of Friends

Can two walk together, except they be agreed?'— Amos 3:8

They do not need to be agreed about everything. They must, however, wish to keep each others company, and they must be going by the same road to the same place. The application of the parable is very plain, though there are differences of opinion as to the bearing of the whole context which need not concern us now. The 'two,' whom the Prophet would fain see walking together, are God and Israel, and his question suggests not only the companionship and communion with God which are the highest form of religion and the aim of all forms and ceremonies of worship, but also the inexorable condition on which alone that height of communion can be secured and sustained. Two may walk together, though the one be God in heaven and the other be I on earth. But they have to be agreed thus far, at any rate, that both shall wish to be together, and both be going the same road.

I. So I ask you to look, first, at that possible blessed companionship which may cheer a life.

There are three phrases in the Old Testament, very like each other, and yet presenting different facets or aspects of the same great truth. Sometimes we read about 'walking before God' as Abraham was bid to do. That means ordering the daily life under the continual sense that we are 'ever in the great Taskmaster's eye' Then there is 'walking after God,' and that means conforming the will and active efforts to the rule that He has laid down, setting our steps firm on the paths that He has prepared that we should walk in them, and accepting His providences. But also, high above both these conceptions of a devout life is the one which is suggested by my text, and which, as you remember, was realised in the case of the patriarch Enoch—'walking with God.' For to walk before Him may have with it some tremor, and may be undertaken in the spirit of the slave who would be glad to get away from the jealous eye that rebukes his slothfulness; and 'walking after Him' may be a painful and partial effort to keep His distant figure in sight; but to 'walk with Him' implies a constant, quiet sense of His Divine Presence which forbids that I should ever be lonely, which guides and defends, which floods my soul and fills my life, and in which, as the companions pace along side by side, words may be spoken by either, or blessed silence may be eloquent of perfect trust and rest.

But, dear brother, far above us as such experience seems to sound, such a life is a possibility for every one of us. We may be able to say, as truly as our Lord said it, 'I am not alone, for the Father is with me.' It is possible that the dreariest solitude of a soul, such as is not realised when the body is removed from men, but is felt most in the crowded city where there is none that loves or fathoms and sympathises, may be turned into blessed fellowship with Him. Yes, but that solitude will not be so turned unless it is first painfully felt. As Daniel said, 'I was left alone, and I saw the great vision.' We need to feel in our deepest hearts that loneliness on earth before we walk with God.

If we are so walking, it is no piece of fanaticism to say that there will be mutual communications. Do you not believe that God knows His way into the spirits that He has endowed with conscious life? Do you not believe that He speaks now to people as truly as He did to prophets and Apostles of old? as truly; though the results of His speech to us of to-day be not of the same authority for others as the words that He spoke to a Paul or a John. The belief in God's communications as for ever sounding in the depths of the Christian spirit does not at all obliterate the distinction between the kind of inspiration which produced the New Testament and that which is realised by all believing and obedient souls. High above all our experience of hearing the words of God in our hearts stands that of those holy men of old who heard God's message whispered in their ears, that they might proclaim it on the housetops to all the world through all generations. But though they and we are on a different level, and God spoke to them for a different purpose, He speaks in our spirits, if we will comply with the conditions, as truly as He did in theirs. As really as it was ever true that the Lord spoke to Abraham, or Isaiah, or Paul, it is true that He now speaks to the man who walks with Him. Frank speech on both sides beguiles many a weary mile, when lovers or friends foot it side by side; and this pair of friends of whom our text speaks have mutual intercourse. God speaks with His servant now, as of old, 'as a man speaketh with his friend'; and we on our parts, if we are truly walking with Him, shall feel it natural to speak frankly to God. As two friends on the road will interchange remarks about trifles, and if they love each other, the remarks about the trifles will be weighted with love, so we can tell our smallest affairs to God; and if we have Him for our Pilgrim-Companion, we do not need to lock up any troubles or concerns of any sort, big or little, in our hearts, but may speak them all to our Friend who goes with us.

The two may walk together. That is the end of all religion. What are creeds for? What are services and sacraments for? What is theology for? What is Christ's redeeming act for? All culminate in this true, constant fellowship between men and God. And unless, in some measure, that result is arrived at in our cases, our religion, let it be as orthodox as you like, our faith in the redemption of Jesus Christ, let it be as real as you will, our attendances on services and sacraments, let them be as punctilious and regular as may be, are all 'sounding brass and tinkling cymbal.' Get side by side with God; that is the purpose of all these, and fellowship with Him is the climax of all religion.

It is also the secret of all blessedness, the only thing that will make a life absolutely sovereign over sorrow, and fixedly unperturbed by all tempests, and invulnerable to all 'the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.' Hold fast by God, and you have an amulet against every evil, and a shield against every foe, and a mighty power that will calm and satisfy your whole being. Nothing else, nothing else will do so. As Augustine said, 'O God! Thou hast made us for Thyself, and in Thyself only are we at rest.' If the Shepherd is with us we will fear no evil.

II. Now, a word, in the next place, as to the sadly incomplete reality, in much Christian experience, which contrasts with this possibility.

I am afraid that very, very few so-called Christian people habitually feel, as they might do, the depth and blessedness of this communion. And sure I am that only a very small percentage of us have anything like the continuity of companionship which my text suggests as possible. There may be, and therefore there should be, running unbroken through a Christian life one long, bright line of communion with God and happy inspiration from the sense of His presence with us. Is it a line in my life, or is there but a dot here, and a dot there, and long breaks between? The long, embarrassed pauses in a conversation between two who do not know much of, or care much for, each other are only too like what occurs in many professing Christians' intercourse with God. Their communion is like those time-worn inscriptions that archaeologists dig up, with a word clearly cut and then a great gap, and then a letter or two, and then another gap, and then a little bit more legible, and then the stone broken, and all the rest gone. Did you ever read the meteorological reports in the newspapers and observe a record like this, 'Twenty minutes' sunshine out of a possible eight hours'? Do you not think that such a state of affairs is a little like the experience of a great many Christian people in regard to their communion with God? It is broken at the best, and imperfect at the completest, and shallow at the deepest. O, dear brethren! rise to the height of your possibilities, and live as close to God as He lets you live, and nothing will much trouble you.

III. And now, lastly, a word about the simple explanation of the failure to realise this continual presence.

'Can two walk together except they be agreed?' Certainly not. Our fathers, in a sterner and more religious age than ours, used to be greatly troubled how to account for a state of Christian experience which they supposed to be due to God's withdrawing of the sense of His presence from His children. Whether there is any such withdrawal or not, I am quite certain that that is not the cause of the interrupted communion between God and the average Christian man.

I make all allowance for the ups and downs and changing moods which necessarily affect us in this present life, and I make all allowance, too, for the pressure of imperative duties and distracting cares which interfere with our communion, though, if we were as strong as we might be, they would not wile us away from, but drive us to, our Father in heaven. But when all such allowances have been made, I come back to my text as the explanation of interrupted communion. The two are not agreed; and that is why they are not walking together. The consciousness of God's presence with us is a very delicate thing. It is like a very sensitive thermometer, which will drop when an iceberg is a league off over the sea, and scarcely visible. We do not wish His company, or we are not in harmony with His thoughts, or we are not going His road, and therefore, of course, we part. At bottom there is only one thing that separates a soul from God, and that is sin—sin of some sort, like tiny grains of dust that get between two polished plates in an engine that ought to move smoothly and closely against each other. The obstruction may be invisible, and yet be powerful enough to cause friction, which hinders the working of the engine and throws everything out of gear. A light cloud that we cannot see may come between us and a star, and we shall only know it is there, because the star is not visibly there. Similarly, many a Christian, quite unconsciously, has something or other in his habits, or in his conduct, or in his affections, which would reveal itself to him, if he would look, as being wrong, because it blots out God.

Let us remember that very little divergence will, if the two paths are prolonged far enough, part their other ends by a world. Our way may go off from the ways of the Lord at a very acute angle. There may be scarcely any consciousness of parting company at the beginning. Let the man travel on upon it far enough, and the two will be so far apart that he cannot see God or hear Him speak. Take care of the little divergences which are habitual, for their accumulated results will be complete separation. There must be absolute surrender if there is to be uninterrupted fellowship.

Such, then, is the direction in which we are to look for the reasons for our low and broken experiences of communion with God. Oh, dear friends! when we do as we sometimes do, wake with a start, like a child that all at once starts from sleep and finds that its mother is gone—when we wake with a start to feel that we are alone, then do not let us be afraid to go straight back. Only be sure that we leave behind us the sin that parted us.

You remember how Peter signalled himself on the lake, on the occasion of the second miraculous draught of fishes, when he floundered through the water and clasped Christ's feet. He did not say then, 'Depart from Me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!' He had said that before on a similar occasion, when he felt his sin less, but now he knew that the best place for the denier was with his head on Christ's bosom. So, if we have parted from our Friend, there should be no time lost ere we go back. May it be true of us that we walk with God, so that at last the great promise may be fulfilled about us, 'that we shall walk with Him in white,' being by His love

accounted 'worthy,' and so 'follow' and keep company with, 'the Lamb whithersoever He goeth!'

Amos 4:4-13 Smitten in Vain

The reign of Jeroboam 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 silken-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 rather with the religious declension underlying the moral filth, and sets forth the self-willed idolatry of the people (Amos 4:4, 5), their obstinate resistance to God's merciful chastisement (Amos 4:6-11), and the heavier impending judgment (Amos 4:12, 13).

I. 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 forwardly in the way of his heart. The real meaning is sufficiently emphasised 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.' That is a smiting sentence to pass upon elaborate ceremonial. The word literally means 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, and also that to call for freewill offerings was to turn spontaneousness into something 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 = 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. The beginning and end of all worship, which is not at same time 'transgression' is the submission of tastes, will, and the whole self. Again, men will lavish gifts far more freely in apparent religious service, which is but the worship of their reflected selves, 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.

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

To Amos, famine, drought, blasting, locusts, pestilence, and probably earthquake, were five messengers of God, and Amos was taught by God. If we looked deeper, we should see more clearly. The true view of the relation of all 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, than they who see all forces except the One which is the only true force. 'I give cleanness of teeth. I have withholden the rain. I have smitten. I have sent the 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. The child who says 'God,' has got nearer the centre than the scientist who says 'Force.'

But Amos had another principle, that God sent physical calamities because of moral delinquencies and for moral and religious 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 comes, learn to look to your irrigation, and don't cut down your forests so wantonly,' say the wise men nowadays; 'if pestilence breaks out, see to your drainage.' By all means. These things, too, are God's commandments, and we have no right to interpret the consequences of infraction of physical laws as being meant to punish nations for their breach of moral and

religious ones. If we were prophets, we might, but not else. But still, 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 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' lesson 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 true 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 charity, which 'suffered long, 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.

III. Again the mood changes, and the issue of protracted resistance is prophesied (vs. 12, 13). 'Therefore' 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 severe in proportion as they are slow. Note the awful vagueness of 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 bolts lurk in its gloom?

The certainty of judgment is the basis of a call to repentance, 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: '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 repentance. Just because He is 'thy God,' will He assuredly come to judge, and you may assuredly prepare, by repentance, to meet Him. The conditions of meeting the Judge, and being 'found of Him in peace,' are that we should be 'without spot, and blameless'; and the conditions of being so spotless and uncensurable are, what they were in Amos's day, repentance and trust. Only we have Jesus as the brightness of the Father's glory to trust in, and His all-sufficient work to trust to, for pardon and purifying.

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 hearts, 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 alternation 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 levelling a path for His purposes across every opposition, He manifests His name, as the living, eternal Jehovah, the God of the Covenant, 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?

Amos 5:4-15 The Sins of Society

The reign of Jeroboam II, in which Amos prophesied, was a period of great prosperity and of great corruption. Amos, born in the Southern Kingdom, and accustomed to the simple life of a shepherd, blazed up in indignation at the signs of misused wealth and selfish luxury that he saw everywhere, in what was to him almost a foreign country. If one fancies a godly Scottish Highlander sent to the West end of London, or a Bible-reading New England farmer's man sent to New York's 'upper ten,' one will have some notion of this prophet, the impressions made, and the task laid on him. He has a message to our state of society which, in many particulars, resembles that which he had to rebuke.

There seems to be a slight dislocation in the order of the verses of the passage, for verse 7 comes in awkwardly, breaking the connection between verses 6 and 8, and itself cut off from verse 10, to which it belongs. If we remove the intruding verse to a position after verse 9, the whole passage is orderly and falls into three coherent parts: an exhortation to seek Jehovah, enforced by various considerations (Amos 5:4-9); a vehement denunciation of social vices (Amos 5:7, 10-13); and a renewed exhortation to seek God by doing right to man (Amos 5:14, 15).

Amos's first call to Israel is but the echo of God's to men, always and everywhere. All circumstances, all inward experiences, joy and sorrow, prosperity and disaster, our longings and our fears, they all cry aloud to us to seek His face. That loving invitation is ever sounding in our ears. And the promise which Amos gave, though it may have meant on his lips the continuance of national life only, yet had, even on his lips, a deeper meaning, which we now cannot but hear in it. For, just as to 'seek the Lord' means more to us than it did to Israel, so the consequent life has greatened, widened, deepened into life eternal. But Amos's narrower, more external promise is true still, and there is no surer way of promoting true well-being than seeking God. 'With Thee is the fountain of life,' in all senses of the word, from the lowest purely physical to the highest, and it is only they who go thither to draw that will carry away their pitchers full of the sparkling blessing. The fundamental principle of Amos's teaching is an eternal truth, that to seek God is to find Him, and to find Him is life.

But Amos further teaches us that such seeking is not real nor able to find, unless it is accompanied with turning away from all sinful quests after vanities. We must give up seeking Bethel, Gilgal, or Beersheba, seats of the calf worship, if we are to seek God to purpose. The sin of the Northern Kingdom was that it wanted to worship Jehovah under the symbol of the calves, thus trying to unite two discrepant things. And is not a great deal of our Christianity of much the same quality? Too many of us are doing just what Elijah told the crowds on Carmel that they were doing, trying to 'shuffle along on both knees.' We would seek God, but we would like to have an occasional visit to Bethel. It cannot be done. There must be detachment, if there is to be any real attachment. And the certain transiency of all creatural objects is a good reason for not fastening ourselves to them, lest we should share their fate. 'Gilgal shall go into captivity, and Bethel shall come to nought,' therefore let us join ourselves to the Eternal Love and we shall abide, as it abides, for ever.

The exhortation is next enforced by presenting the consequences of neglecting it. To seek Him is life, not to seek Him incurs the danger of finding Him in unwelcome ways. That is for ever true. We do not get away from God by forgetting Him, but we run the risk of finding in Him, not the fire which vitalises, purifies, melts, and gladdens, but that which consumes. The fire is one, but its effects are twofold. God is for us either that fire into which it is blessedness to be baptized, or that by which it is death to be burned up. And what can Bethel, or calves, or all the world do to quench it or pluck us out of it?

Once more the exhortation is urged, if we link verse 8 with verse 6, and supply 'Seek ye' at its beginning. Here the enforcement is drawn from the considerations of God's workings in nature and history. The shepherd from Tekoa had often gazed up at the silent splendours of the Pleiades and Orion, as he kept watch over his flocks by night, and had seen the thick darkness on the wide uplands thinning away as the morning stole on over the mountains across the Dead Sea, and the day dying as he gathered his sheep together. He had cowered under the torrential rains which swept across his exposed homeland, and had heard God's voice summoning the obedient waters of the sea, that He might pour them down in rain. But the moral government of the world also calls on men to seek Jehovah. 'He causeth destruction to flash forth on the strong, so that destruction cometh upon the fortress.' High things attract the lightning. Godless strength is sure, sooner or later, to be smitten down, and no fortress is so impregnable that He cannot capture and overthrow it. Surely wisdom bids us seek Him that does all these wonders, and make Him our defence and our high tower.

The second part gives a vivid picture of the vices characteristic of a prosperous state of society which is godless, and therefore selfishly luxurious. First, civil justice is corrupted, turned into bitterness, and prostrated to the ground. Then bold denouncers of national sins are violently hated. Do we not know that phase of an ungodly and rich society? What do the newspapers say about Christians who try to be social reformers? Are the epithets flung at them liker bouquets or rotten eggs? 'Fanatics and faddists' are the mildest of them. Then the poor are trodden down and have to give large parts of their scanty harvests to the rich. Have capital and labour just proportions of their joint earnings? Would a sermon on verse 11 be welcome in the suburbs of industrial centres, where the employers have their 'houses of hewn stone'? Such houses, side by side with the poor men's huts, struck the eye of the shepherd from Tekoa as the height of sinful luxury, and still more sinful disproportion in the social condition of the two classes. What would he have said if he had lived in England or America? Justice, too, was bought and sold. A murderer could buy himself off, while the poor man, who could not pay, lost his case. We do not bribe juries, but (legal) justice is an expensive luxury still, and counsel's fees put it out of the reach of poor men.

One of the worst features of such a state of society as Amos saw is that men are afraid to speak out in condemnation of it, and the ill weeds grow apace for want of a scythe. Amos puts a certain sad emphasis on 'prudent,' as if he was feeling how little he could be called so, and yet there is a touch of scorn in him too. The man who is over-careful of his skin or his reputation will hold his tongue; even good men may become so accustomed to the glaring corruptions of society in the midst of which they have always lived, that they do not feel any call to rebuke or wage war against them; but the brave man, the man who takes his ideals from Christ, and judges society by its conformity with Christ's standard, will not keep silence, and the more he feels that 'It is an evil time' the more will he feel that he cannot but speak out, whatever comes of his protest. What masquerades as prudence is very often sinful cowardice, and such silence is treason against Christ.

The third part repeats the exhortation to 'seek,' with a notable difference. It is now 'good' that is to be sought, and 'evil' that is to be turned from. These correspond respectively to 'Jehovah,' and 'Bethel, Gilgal, and Beersheba,' in former verses. That is to say, morality is the garb of religion, and religion is the only true source of morality. If we are not seeking the things that are lovely and of good report, our professions of seeking God are false; and we shall never earnestly and successfully seek good and hate evil unless we have begun by seeking and finding God, and holding Him in our heart of hearts. Modern social reformers, who fancy that they can sweeten society without religion, might do worse than go to school to Amos.

Notable, too, is the lowered tone of confidence in the beneficial result of obeying the Prophet's call. In the earlier exhortation the promise had been absolute. 'Seek ye Me, and ye shall live'; now it has cooled to 'it may be.' Is Amos faltering? No; but while it is always true that blessed life is found by the seeker after God, because He finds the very source of life, it is not always true that the consequences of past turnings from Him are diverted by repentance. 'It may be' that these have to be endured, but even they become tokens of Jehovah's graciousness, and the purified 'remnant of Joseph' will possess the true life more abundantly because they have been exercised thereby.

Amos 4:8 The Carcass and the Eagles

Amos prophesied during the reign of Jeroboam, the son of Joash. Jeroboam's reign was a time of great prosperity for Israel. Moab, Gilead, and part of Syria were reconquered, and the usual effects of conquest, increased luxury and vainglory, followed. Amos was not an Israelite born, for he came from Tekoa, away down south, in the wild country west of the Dead Sea, where he had been a simple herdsman till the divine call sent him into the midst of the corrupt civilisation of the Northern Kingdom. The first words of his prophecy give its whole spirit: 'The Lord will roar from Zion.' The word rendered 'roar' is the term specially used for the terrible cry with which a lion leaps on its surprised prey (Amos 3:4, 8). It is from Zion, the seat of God's Temple, that the 'roar' proceeds, and Amos's prophecy is but the echo of it in Israel.

The prophecy of judgment in this passage is directed against the sins of the upper classes in Samaria. They are described in verse 1 as the 'notable men . . . to whom the house of Israel come,' which, in modern language, is just 'conspicuous citizens,' who set the fashion, and are looked to as authorities and leaders, whether in political or commercial or social life. The word by which they are designated is used in Numbers 1:17: 'Which are expressed by name.' The word 'carried back the thoughts of the degenerate aristocracy of Israel to the faith and zeal of their forefathers' (Pusey, *Minor Prophets*, on this verse). Israel, Amos calls 'The first of the nations.' It is singular that such a title should be given to the nation against whose corruption his one business is to testify, but probably there is keen irony in the word. It takes Israel at its own estimate, and then goes on to show how rotten, and therefore short-lived, was the prosperity which had swollen national pride to such a pitch. The chiefs of the foremost nation in the world should surely be something better than the heartless debauchees whom the Prophet proceeds to paint. Anglo-Saxons on both sides of the Atlantic, who are by no means deficient in this same complacent estimate of their own superiority to all other peoples, may take note. The same thought is prominent in the description of these notables as 'at ease.' They are living in a fool's paradise, shutting their eyes to the thunder-clouds that begin to rise slowly above the horizon, and keeping each other in countenance in laughing at Amos and his gloomy forecasts. They 'trusted in the mountain of Samaria,' which, they thought, made the city impregnable to assault. No doubt they thought that the Prophet's talk about doing right and trusting in Jehovah was very fanatical and unpractical, just as many in England and America think that their nations are exalted, not by righteousness, but by armies, navies, and dollars or sovereigns.

Verse 2 is very obscure to us from our ignorance of the facts underlying its allusions. In fact, it has been explained in exactly opposite ways, being taken by some to enumerate three instances of prosperous communities, which yet are not more prosperous than Israel, and by others to enumerate three instances of God's judgments falling on places which, though strong, had been conquered. In the former explanation, God's favour to Israel is made the ground of an implied appeal to their gratitude; in the latter, His judgments on other nations are made the ground of an appeal to their fear, lest like destruction should fall on them.

But the main points of the passage are the photograph of the crimes which are bringing the judgment of God, and the solemn divine oath to inflict the judgment. The crimes rebuked are not the false worship of the calves, though in other parts of his prophecy Amos lashes that with terrible invectives, nor foul breaches of morality, though these were not wanting in Israel, but the vices peculiar to selfish, luxurious upper classes in all times and countries, who forget the obligations of wealth, and think only of its possibilities of self-indulgence. French noblesse before the Revolution, and English peers and commercial magnates, and American millionaires, would yield examples of the same sin. The hardy shepherd from Tekoa had learned 'plain living and high thinking' before he was a prophet, and would look with wondering and disgusted eyes at the wicked waste which he saw in Samaria. He begins with scourging the reckless security already referred to. These notables in Israel were 'at ease' because they 'put far away the evil day,' by refusing to believe that it was at hand, and paying no heed to prophets' warnings, as their fellows do still and always, and as we all are tempted to do. They who see and declare the certain end of national or personal sins are usually jeered at as pessimists, fanatics, alarmists, bad patriots, or personal ill-wishers, and the men whom they try to warn fancy that they hinder the coming of a day of

retribution by disbelieving in its coming. Incredulity is no lightning-conductor to keep off the flash, and, listened to or not, the low growls of the thunder are coming nearer.

With one hand these sinners tried to push away the evil day, while with the other they drew near to themselves that which made its coming certain—‘the seat of violence,’ or, rather, ‘the sitting,’ or ‘session.’ Violence, or wrongdoing, is enthroned by them, and where men enthrone iniquity, God’s day of vengeance is not far off.

Then follows a graphic picture of the senseless, corrupting luxury of the Samaritan magnates, on which the Tekoan shepherd pours his scorn, but which is simplicity itself, and almost asceticism, before what he would see if he came to London or New York. To him it seemed effeminate to loll on a divan at meals, and possibly it was a custom imported from abroad. It is noted that ‘the older custom in Israel was to sit while eating.’ The woodwork of the divans, inlaid with ivory, had caught his eye in some of his peeps into the great houses, and he inveighs against them very much as one of the Pilgrim Fathers might do if he could see the furniture in the drawing-rooms of some of his descendants. There is no harm in pretty things, but the æsthetic craze does sometimes indicate and increase selfish heartlessness as to the poverty and misery, which have not only no ivory on their divans, but no divans at all. Thus stretched in unmanly indolence on their cushions, they feast on delicacies. ‘Lambs out of the flock’ and ‘calves out of the stall’ seem to mean animals too young to be used as food. These gourmands, like their successors, prided themselves on having dainties out of season, because they were more costly then. And their feasts had the adornment of music, which the shepherd, who knew only the pastoral pipe that gathered his sheep, refers to with contempt. He uses a very rare word of uncertain meaning, which is probably best rendered in some such way as the Revised Version does: ‘They sing idle songs.’ To him their elaborate performances seemed like empty babble. Worse than that, they ‘devise musical instruments like David.’ But how unlike him in the use they make of art! What a descent from the praises of God to the ‘idle songs’ fit for the hot dining-halls and the guests there! Amos was indignant at the profanation of art, and thought it best used in the service of God. What would he have said if he had been ‘fastened into a front-row box’ and treated to a modern opera?

The revellers ‘drink wine in bowls’ by which larger vessels than generally employed are intended. They drank to excess, or as we might say, by bucketfuls. So the dainty feast, with its artistic refinement and music, ends at last in a brutal carouse, and the heads anointed with the most costly unguents drop in drunken slumber. A similar picture of Samaritan manners is drawn by Isaiah (chap. 28) , and obviously drunkenness was one of the besetting sins of the capital.

But the darkest hue in the dark picture has yet to be added: ‘They are not grieved for the affliction (literally, the ‘breach’ or ‘wound’) of Joseph.’ The tribe of Ephraim, Joseph’s son, being the principal tribe of the Northern Kingdom, Joseph is often employed as a synonym for Israel. All these pieces of luxury, corrupting and effeminate as they are, might be permitted, but heartless indifference to the miseries groaning at the door of the banqueting-hall goes with them. ‘The classes’ are indifferent to the condition of ‘the masses.’ Put Amos into modern English, and he is denouncing the heartlessness of wealth, refinement, art, and culture, which has no ear for the complaining of the poor, and no eyes to see either the sorrows and sins around it, or the lowering cloud that is ready to burst in tempest.

The inevitable issue is certain, because of the very nature of God. It is outlined with keen irony. Amos sees in imagination the long procession of sad captives, and marching in the front ranks, the self-indulgent Sybarites, whose pre-eminence is now only the melancholy prerogative of going first in the fettered train. What has become of their revelry? It is gone, like the imaginary banquets of dreams, and instead of luxurious lolling on silken couches, there is the weary tramp of the captive exiles. Such result must be, since God is what He is. He has sworn ‘by Himself’; His being and character are the pledge that it will be so as Amos has declared. How can such a God as He is do otherwise than hate the pride of such a selfish, heartless, God-forgetting aristocracy? How can He do otherwise than deliver up the city? God has not changed, and though His mills grind slowly, they do grind still; and it is as true for England and America, as it was for Samaria, that a wealthy and leisurely upper class, which cares only for material luxury glossed over by art, which has condescended to be its servant, is bringing near the evil day which it hugs itself into believing will never come.

Amos 8:1-14 Ripe For Gathering

There are three visions in the former chapter, each beginning as verse 1 . This one is therefore intended to be taken as the continuation of these, and it is in substance a repetition of the third, only with more detail and emphasis. An insolent attempt, by the priest of Beth-el, to silence the Prophet, and the fiery answer which he got for his pains, come between. The stream of Amos’s prophecy flows on, uninterrupted by the boulder which had tried to dam it up. Some courage was needed to treat Amaziah and his blasphemous bluster as a mere parenthesis.

We have first to note the vision and its interpretation. It is such as a countryman, ‘a dresser of sycamore trees’ would naturally have. Experience supplies forms and material for the imagination, and moulds into which God-given revelations run. The point of the vision is rather obscured by the rendering ‘summer fruit.’ ‘Ripe fruit’ would be better, since the emblem represents the Northern Kingdom as ripe for the dreadful ingathering of judgment. The word for this (qayits) and that for ‘the end’ (qets) are alike in sound, but the play of

words cannot be reproduced, except by some clumsy device, such as 'the end ripens' or 'the time of ripeness comes.' The figure is frequent in other prophecies of judgment, as, for instance, in Revelation 14:14-20 .

Observe the repetition, from the preceding vision, of 'I will not pass by them any more.' The first two visions had threatened judgments, which had been averted by the Prophet's intercession; but the third, and now the fourth, declare that the time for prolonged impunity is passed. Just as the mellow ripeness of the fruit fixes the time of gathering it, so there comes a stage in national and individual corruption, when there is nothing to be done but to smite. That period is not reached because God changes, but because men get deeper in sin. Because 'the harvest is ripe,' the long-delayed command, 'Put in thy sickle' is given to the angel of judgment, and the clusters of those black grapes, whose juice in the wine-press of the wrath of God is blood, are cut down and cast in. It is a solemn lesson, applying to each soul as well as to communities. By neglect of God's voice, and persistence in our own evil ways, we can make ourselves such that we are ripe for judgment, and can compel long-suffering to strike. Which are we ripening for—the harvest when the wheat shall be gathered into Christ's barns, or that when the tares shall be bound in bundles for burning?

The tragedy of that fruit-gathering is described with extraordinary grimness and force in the abrupt language of verse 3 . The merry songs sung in the palace (this rendering seems more appropriate here than 'temple') will be broken off, and the singers' voices will quaver into shrill shrieks, so suddenly will the judgment be. Then comes a picture as abrupt in its condensed terribleness as anything in Tacitus—'Many the corpses; everywhere they fling them; hush!' We see the ghastly masses of dead ('corpse' is in the singular, as if a collective noun), so numerous that no burial-places could hold them; and no ceremonial attended them, but they were rudely flung anywhere by anybody (no nominative is given), with no accustomed voice of mourning, but in gloomy silence. It is like Defoe's picture of the dead-cart in the plague of London. Such is ever the end of departing from God—songs palsied into silence or turned into wailing when the judgment bursts; death stalking supreme, and silence brooding over all.

The crimes that ripened men for this terrible harvest are next set forth, in part, in verses 4 to 6 . These verses partly coincide verbally with the previous indictment in Amos 2:6 , etc., which, however, is more comprehensive. Here only one form of sin is dealt with. And what was the sin that deserved the bad eminence of being thus selected as the chief sign that Israel was ripe and rotten? Precisely the one which gets most indulgence in the Christian Church; namely, eagerness to be rich, and sharp, unkindly dealing. These men, who were only fit to be swept out of the land, were most punctual in their religious duties. They would not on any account do business either on a festival or on Sabbath, but they were very impatient till—shall we say? Monday morning came—that they might get to their beloved work again.

Their lineal descendants are no strangers on the exchanges, or in the churches of London or New York. They were not only outwardly scrupulous and inwardly weary of religious observances, but when they did get to 'business,' they gave short measure and took a long price, and knew how to turn the scales always in their own favour. It was the expedient of rude beginners in the sacred art of getting the best of a bargain, to put a false bottom in the ephah , and to stick a piece of lead below the shekel weight, which the purchaser had to make go up in the scale with his silver. There are much neater ways of doing the same thing now; and no doubt some very estimable gentlemen in high repute as Christians, who give respectability to any church or denomination, could have taught these early practitioners a lesson or two.

They were as cruel as they were greedy. They bought their brethren as slaves, and if a poor man had run into their debt for even a pair of shoes, they would sell him up in a very literal sense. Avarice, unbridled by the fear of God, leads by a short cut to harshness and disregard of the claims of others. There are more ways of buying the needy for a pair of shoes than these people practised. The last touch in the picture is meanness, which turned everything into money. Even what fell through the sieve when wheat was winnowed, which ought to have been given to anybody, was carefully scraped up, and, dirty as it was, sold. Is not 'nothing for nothing' an approved maxim to-day? Are not people held up as shining lights of commerce, who have the faculty of turning everything into saleable articles? Some serious reflections ought to be driven home to us who live in great commercial communities, and are in manifold ways tempted to 'learn their ways, and so get a snare unto our souls,' by this gibbeting of tempers and customs, very common among ourselves, as the very head and front of the sin of Israel, which determined its ripeness for destruction.

The catalogue of sins is left incomplete (compare with chapter ii.), as if holy indignation turned for relief to the thought of the certain judgment. That certainly is strongly affirmed by the representation of the oath of Jehovah. 'He can swear by no other,' therefore He 'swears by Himself'; and the 'excellency of Jacob' cannot with propriety mean anything else than Him who is, or ought to be, the sole ground of confidence and occasion of 'boasting' to the nation (Hos. v. 5). He gives His own being as the guarantee that judgment shall fall. As surely as God is God, injustice and avarice will ruin a nation. We talk now about necessary consequences and natural laws rendering penalties inevitable. The Bible suggests a deeper foundation for their certain incidence—even the very nature of God Himself. As long as He is what He is, covetousness and its child, harshness to the needy, will be sin against Him, and be avenged sooner or later. God has a long and a wide memory, and the sins which He 'remembers' are those which He has not forgiven, and will punish.

Amos heaps image on image to deepen the impression of terror and confusion. Everything is turned to its opposite. The solid land reels, rises, and falls, like the Nile in flood (see Revised Version). The sun sets at midday, and noon is darkness. Feasts change to mourning, songs to lamentations. Rich garments are put aside for sackcloth, and flowing locks drop off and leave bald heads. These are evidently all figures vividly piled together to express the same thought. The crash that destroyed their national prosperity and existence would shake the most solid things and darken the brightest. It would come suddenly, as if the sun plunged from the zenith to the west. It would make joy a stranger, and bring grief as bitter as when a father or a mother mourns the death of an only son. Besides all this, something darker beyond is dimly hinted in that awful, vague, final threat, 'The end thereof as a bitter day.'

Now all these threats were fulfilled in the fall of the kingdom of Israel; but that 'day of the Lord' was in principle a miniature foreshadowing of the great final judgment. Some of the very features of the description here are repeated with reference to it in the New Testament. We cannot treat such prophecies as this as if they were exhausted by their historical fulfilment. They disclose the eternal course of divine judgment, which is to culminate in a future day of judgment. The oath of God is not yet completely fulfilled. Assuredly as He lives and is God, so surely will modern sinners have to stand their trial; and, as of old, the chase after riches will bring down crashing ruin. We need that vision of judgment as much as Samaria did when Amos saw the basket of ripe fruit, craving, as it were, to be plucked. So do obstinate sinners invite destruction.

The last section specifies one feature of judgment, the deprivation of the despised word of the Lord (vs. 11-14). Like Saul, whose piteous wail in the witch's hovel was, 'God . . . answereth me no more,' they who paid no heed to the word of the Lord shall one day seek far and wearily for a prophet, and seek in vain. The word rendered 'wander,' which is used in the other description of people seeking for water in a literal drought (iv. 8), means 'reel,' and gives the picture of men faint and dizzy with thirst, yet staggering on in vain quest for a spring. They seek everywhere, from the Dead Sea on the east to the Mediterranean on the west, and then up to the north, and so round again to the starting-point. Is it because Judah was south that that quarter is not visited? Perhaps, if they had gone where the Temple was, they would have found the stream from under its threshold, which a later prophet saw going forth to heal the marshes and dry places. Why was the search vain? Has not God promised to be found of those that seek, however far they have gone away? The last verse tells why. They still were idolaters, swearing by the 'sin of Samaria,' which is the calf of Beth-el, and by the other at Dan, and going on idolatrous pilgrimages to Beer-sheba, far away in the south, across the whole kingdom of Judah (Amos v. 5). It was vain to seek for the word of the Lord with such doings and worship.

The truth implied is universal in its application. God's message neglected is withdrawn. Conscience stops if continually unheeded. The Gospel may still sound in a man's ears, but have long ceased to reach farther. There comes a time when men shall wish wasted opportunities back, and find that they can no more return than last summer's heat. There may be a wish for the prophet in time of distress, which means no real desire for God's word, but only for relief from calamity. There may be a sort of seeking for the word, which seeks in the wrong places and in the wrong ways, and without abandoning sins. Such quest is vain. But if, driven by need and sorrow, a poor soul, feeling the thirst after the living God, cries from ever so distant a land of bondage, the cry will be answered. But let us not forget that our Lord has told us to take heed how we hear, on the very ground that 'to him that hath shall be given; and from him that hath not, even that he hath shall be taken away.'