**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**AMOS-003. THE SINS OF SOCIETY by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"4. For thus saith the Lord unto the house of Israel, Seek ye Me, and ye shall live: 5. But seek not Beth-el, nor enter into Gilgal, and pass not to Beer-sheba: for Gilgal shall surely go into captivity, and Beth-el shall come to nought. 6. Seek the Lord, and ye shall live; lest He break out like fire in the house of Joseph, and devour it, and there be none to quench it in Beth-el. 7. Ye who turn judgment to wormwood, and leave off righteousness in the earth, 8. Seek Him that maketh the seven stars and Orion, and turneth the shadow of death into the morning, and maketh the day dark with night: that calleth for the waters of the sea, and poureth them out upon the face of the earth: The Lord is His name: 9. That strengtheneth the spoiled against the strong, so that the spoiled shall come against the fortress. 10. They hate him that rebuketh in the gate, and they abhor him that speaketh uprightly. 11. Forasmuch therefore as your treading is upon the poor, and ye take from him burdens of wheat: ye have built houses of hewn stone, but ye shall not dwell in them; ye have planted pleasant vineyards, but ye shall not drink wine of them. 12. For I know your manifold transgressions and your mighty sins: they afflict the just, they take a bribe, and they turn aside the poor in the gate from their right 13. Therefore the prudent shall keep silence in that time; for it is an evil time. 14. Seek good, and not evil, that ye may live: and so the Lord, the God of hosts, shall be with you, as ye have spoken. 15. Hate the evil, and love the good, and establish judgment in the gate: it may be that the Lord God of hosts will be gracious unto the remnant of Joseph."*

*Amos 5:4-15*

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 (vs. 4-9); a vehement denunciation of social vices (vs. 7, 10-13); and a renewed exhortation to seek God by doing right to man (vs. 14, 15).

**I.** 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 op 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.

**II.** 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.

**III.** 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.