

DESOLATION

James Russell Lowell once wrote,

*"Once in every man and nation comes a moment to decide,
In the strife of Truth with Falsehood, for the good
or evil side."*

And that time is now, for every man and for every nation! Yes, for you!

This might well serve as a summary of the fifth chapter of Amos. It speaks of dedication or desolation—dedication to Jehovah and His will, or desolation before the onslaughts of a ruthless foe. Let us consider this chapter as we note, first, the warning; second, the wickedness; third, the wooing.

FIRST, note the warning. In dramatic fashion Amos begins this chapter with a lamentation or funeral dirge for the house of Israel. Says he, "The virgin of Israel is fallen; she shall no more rise." He regards Israel as already destroyed. The Hebrew word speaks of violent death. "For thus saith the Lord God; The city that went out by a thousand shall leave an hundred, and that went forth by an hundred shall leave ten, to the house of Israel" (v. 3). Nine-tenths of her soldiers shall be destroyed in battle. In verses 16-17 he returns to this theme. "Wailing shall be in all streets; and they shall say in all the highways, Alas! alas!" The farmers and vinedressers will join in the mourning. Thus the cities and the countryside shall feel the wrath of the invader. Every road will be filled with mournful funeral processions. No one will escape.

Within our lifetime warfare has taken on a horrible progression. Until less than one hundred years ago wars were largely confined to contending armies in limited areas. Most private citizens lived in comparative safety. This was true in the main during World War I. The rapid development of the airplane increased the area of danger in World War II to include many

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cities where thousands of citizens, including women and children, died from bombings. Military experts tell us that World War III, if it comes will see no zones of safety from nuclear bombs and rockets. Every street within every city will be the front lines of combat. Nuclear fallout will reach even sparsely inhabited areas.

Someone asked a historian if he thought that any human life might survive such a war. He started to reply that maybe the Eskimos might survive. Then, remembering that it could be over their very area that giant planes might ferry their lethal loads, he said, "Perhaps somewhere in the jungles of Africa there might be a small group of pygmies left to carry on the human race."

Can you afford to ignore such warnings? It is as though God, with the trailing exhaust of every giant rocket fired at some distant, unseen target, were saying, "Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish" (Lk. 13:3). Still you ignore His warning.

SECOND, consider the wickedness. Why had Israel come to such tragic days? Because she had lost her sense of purpose for being. She had been chosen as a nation to bring all other peoples to God. But look at her. She had lost this vision in her greed for gain. Hear the prophet's charges.

"Forasmuch therefore as your treading is upon the poor, and ye take from him burdens of wheat... For I know your manifold transgressions [rebellions against God] and your mighty sins [habitual variation from the right]" (vv. 11-12). Then Amos itemizes the sins. "They afflict the just, they take a bribe, and turn aside the poor in the gate [places of judgment] from their right" (v. 12).

Because of these sins judgment is coming upon the nation. "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" (v. 11). They have sold their birthright for a mess of dishonest pottage. But even that will be taken from them.

Our present world has also lost her sense of purpose and destiny. Instead she has emblazoned her banners with material values as the chief end of life. In a recent man-on-the-street poll the question was asked as to the chief source of happiness. One man said, "Money." When asked to explain his answer, he said, "Because, if you do not have money you have nothing for which to live."

Do you say that this is merely the thoughtless attitude of a man on the street? But what about the man behind the mahogany desk in the skyscraper? When the stock market crashed in 1929 many of them jumped from their office windows to their death. Without money they had nothing for which to live.

IMMORAL AGE

Have the intervening years of depression and war taught us any different lesson? The headlines of every daily paper scream of corruption in business, of gouging and cheating for gain, of clashes between capital and labor, of so-called statesmen padding expense accounts for worldly pleasures far removed from the duties of state. Rigged television shows and "payola" are no isolated incidents. They but reveal the low moral fibre of our entire social order.

Movies and smut literature which defy every sense of moral decency are justified as being what the public wants to see and read. For a movie to be placed under the censor's ban is to insure its financial success at the box office. A few years ago actors convicted in moral cases were banned from the screen. Today such publicity may prove to be stepping stones to success. Anything, everything is justified on the basis of liberty, a liberty which too often is perverted into license.

DESTRUCTION

And what is the end of all this? God says that it is destruction. Build your houses out of ill-gotten gain, but you shall not live in them. Provide for your unbridled pleasure, but it shall turn into bitterness and sorrow in your soul. It may be that God's patience will forbear, but, like the words of Jesus regarding the rich fool, "These things are requiring thy soul of thee" (Luke 12:20, author's translation).

Such words from this preacher may seem strange and repulsive to you. As in Amos 5:10 so may it be said of you, "They hate him that rebuketh in the gate, and they abhor him that speaketh uprightly."

In defiance of the prophet's message the Israelites made three replies. First, they pointed to their beautiful buildings and thriving vineyards as proof of God's good pleasure concerning them. In response Amos said

that they would neither live in their fine houses nor drink from their fruitful vineyards. The same is true today.

You may shrug off this message by pointing to the towering buildings which house the marts of trade in our cities. You may hide behind the unprecedented harvests of our fields or the booming prosperity on every hand. In so doing you may laugh at God's prophet in this hour.

But before you do so take a look at history. Some months ago I walked through the Roman Forum where eight hundred years of the world's history were made. We saw the golden milestone from which all distances in the Roman Empire were measured. We stood on the spot where Cato and other Roman statesmen spoke for all the world to listen and tremble. Any prophet who two thousand years ago had prophesied that such an empire would fall would have sounded as a fanatic. But look at the Forum today. It is nothing but ruins.

HOPE IS IN GOD

Walk, if you will, down the paved canyons of New York City or across the sprawling areas of London. One H-bomb lodged in the nose cone of an enemy rocket could in seconds reduce them to rubble filled with the stench of death. Your future hope lies not in materialistic might but in repentance and a return to God.

Again, the Israelites said to Amos, "Are we not the people

of God. We shall be saved by a mighty deliverance in the day of the Lord." But hear Amos' reply. "Woe unto them that desire the day of the Lord! to what end is it for you? the day of the Lord is darkness, and not light" (v. 18). They need not expect to escape when calamity comes. In verse 19 Amos continues, "As if a man did flee from a lion, and a bear met him; or went into the house, and leaned his hand on the wall and a serpent bit him." Note the drama of this verse. A man chased by a lion eludes it, only to meet a bear. He may even outrun the bear. In the seeming safety of his home, exhausted he leans his hand upon the wall only to be bitten by a serpent lodged in a crack in the wall.

The point is that you cannot hope to escape from the certain judgment of the Lord. And why this judgment?

RELIGIOUS VOID

The Israelites tried again. "Not only are we God's people, but look and see how religious we are."

But once again hear God's reply through His prophet. "I hate, I despise your feast days, and I will not smell in your solemn assemblies. Though ye offer me burnt offerings and your meat offerings, I will not accept them: neither will I regard the peace offerings of your fat beasts. Take thou away from me the noise of thy songs; for I will not hear the melody of thy viols" (vv.21-23).

Do you ask, "Does not God want us to worship Him?" Certainly! But Israel's trouble was that her worship was lip service only while her heart was far from God. God's answer in verse 24-27 is "But let judgment [justice] run [roll] down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty [ever-flowing] stream. Have ye offered unto me sacrifices and offerings in the wilderness forty years, O house of Israel? But ye have borne the tabernacle of your Moloch and Chiun your images, the star of your god, which ye made to yourselves. Therefore will I cause you to go into captivity beyond Damascus, saith the Lord, whose name is the God of hosts."

THINGS OR GOD?

A modern parallel is most fitting. You observe your religious seasons, pack your churches, bring your offerings, and sing your songs. Is God pleased with all this? He is not! And why? Because you substitute things for God. You offer to God beautiful buildings, mystical ritual, and mounting numbers on your church rolls. But all too often your worship is centered upon these things which you have made for yourselves. Your hearts are far removed from a right relation with the living God. God despises these things when you allow them to become a substitute for Him. And unless you and I change, God has no choice. "Therefore I will cause you to go into captivity beyond Damascus."

THIRD, note the wooing. Repeatedly in Amos 5 God urges Israel to seek Him. In verses 4-5 He says, "Seek ye me and ye shall live: but seek not Bethel, nor enter into Gilgal, and pass not to Beersheba: for Gilgal shall go into captivity, and Bethel shall come to naught." Bethel and Gilgal were their regular places of worship. Some might even go on a pilgrimage to Beersheba, far to the south. But none of these shall avail. Gilgal shall be captured. Beth-el, which means "the house of God," shall become Beth-aven, or house of nothingness. Again in verses 14-15 God says, "Seek good, and not evil, that ye may live . . . 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."

REPENT, BELIEVE

This is a call to repentance both then and now. God still loves you and wants to extend His mercy to you. But nations repent only as its people repent. God can only bestow His mercy and grace upon those who will receive it. Daily the world situation grows worse. But amid all of the cries of race and clan you may hear the still small voice of the Holy Spirit as He woos your soul. There may seem to be little that you can do to turn the tides of nations. But like Joshua you can say, "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord" (Joshua 24-15).