

OPPO

“Behold, the days come,

saith the Lord God,

that I will send a famine

in the land, not a famine of bread,

nor a thirst for water,

but of hearing the words of the Lord . . .”—Amos 8:11

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow once wrote:

*Though the mills of God grind slowly,
yet they grind exceedingly small;
Though with patience He stands waiting,
with exactness grinds He all.*

At some time or other, each of you has gazed at the sun as it made its journey from east to west. At dawn it seemed to leap into the sky. At noontime it appeared suspended and motionless. In the afternoon slowly, almost imperceptibly, it moved toward the western horizon. Then at the horizon it seemed suddenly to drop from sight. Immediately there came the twilight, soon to be engulfed in the darkness of the night.

In this simple illustration is a parable of the life of a nation. It issues into being in a moment. At the zenith of its greatness it has about it the aurora of constancy and stability. Then slowly, almost without awareness, the processes of decay begin. When its inner supports have been eaten away, by its own sheer weight it seems to drop from sight. The twilight comes, and then the dark. As the sun has made this journey times without number, so has nation after nation traveled its course.

How far across the firmament of history has our nation gone? Is it at the dawn, the noonday, mid-afternoon, or in that fateful moment seconds away from twilight? What is the answer of God's Word?

OPPORTUNITY RAPIDLY FADES

BY DR. HERSCHEL H. HOBBS

on *The Baptist Hour*, November 13, 1960

The eighth chapter of Amos contains the last of four visions which God gave to His prophet regarding divine retribution upon Israel. Let us examine this vision as we note, first, the summer fruit; second, the sinful neglect; third, the certain end.

A BASKET OF SUMMER FRUIT

FIRST, note the summer fruit. Several interpretations have been suggested as to the meaning of the basket of summer fruit. (1) As summer fruit, when ripe, will soon decay, so, Israel, ripe in her sins, shall soon come to an end. (2) Summer fruit, when ripe, is plucked to prevent decay. So Israel shall be carried into captivity to prevent her total destruction. (3) Summer fruit is plucked late, the poorest of the lot, since the better fruit has been gathered earlier. The basket of summer fruit depicts the last of the crop, and so the end of the year. It suggests the rapidly approaching end of the kingdom of Israel. This last interpretation seems to be the best of the three.

In the Old Testament, Israel is often referred to as the vine of Jehovah to which He comes for fruit. Isaiah, a contemporary of Amos, pictured Judah as a "vineyard in a very fruitful hill" (5:1). He tells how Jehovah fenced it, removed the stones, planted it with choice vines, built a watchtower to protect it, and built a winepress to process the fruit. But says Isaiah of Jehovah, "He looked that it should bring forth grapes, and it brought forth wild [stinking or rotten] grapes" (5:2).

These words apply equally as well to the northern kingdom
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"We hate France, despise Great Britain, and do not trust the United States." He hastened to add, "We know that the United States means well, but in her alliance with the others we see her as an unwitting partner in the suppression of our part of the world." In response to a question as to Russia, he said, "We know what the West has done to us. We do not know about the East. But we are inclined to take a chance with the latter."

Last year I made a trip around the world. Everywhere—the Orient, Europe, yes, the Middle East—I found only good will for the United States. She was regarded as the hope of the world. Naturally, I asked myself, "Why the change?" Then the answer came. Between these visits there had occurred such events as Hungary, Tibet, the Suez crisis, incidents in Lebanon, Laos, and the China-India border dispute. In all these the United States had stood as the champion of the rights of smaller nations, calling both her friends and her foes to task where those rights were violated. Free men everywhere recognized where their true friendship lies.

This is a beginning, but only a beginning. The time has come when preventive measures alone cannot suffice. With the zeal of an evangel our nation must propagate the principles which have made her what she is—political, economic, and spiritual.

How can this evangelism best be accomplished? It is in the light of this question that every citizen should enter the sacred enclosure of the free and secret ballot.

DESIGN OF LIBERTY

THIRD, note the design of liberty. The Judeo-Christian concept regards man in the high dignity with which God made him. He is a free soul destined to stand before God, with God

alone as the basic and final tribunal of his faith and fate. All of this is bound up in the word "liberty." We have seen that in Israel this concept had been lost in the mad rush of oppression and greed.

To one who has visited other areas of the earth, the "Stars and Stripes" flutter in the breeze as an oasis in a desert. The word "America" is a magic word embodying the hopes and dreams of underprivileged and downtrodden people. Technically, the word "America" refers to the Western Hemisphere. But in the parlance of ordinary men it means one thing—the United States. While the citizens of other nations of this hemisphere are called by their national names, the word "American" is given to citizens of the United States. Why? Because the word no longer refers to geography or nationality. It embodies a principle, the principle of liberty.

It is an historical fact that this nation was founded by those who came to its shores to escape the political and religious persecution of Europe. The Declaration of Independence begins by stating that all men are born with inalienable rights. The first amendment to the American Constitution guarantees that the political may not encroach upon the religious rights of men. It guarantees the basic liberties of a free people: freedom of worship, of speech, of the press, of assembly, and the right of the redress of grievances against the government. Freedom is not a privilege to be bestowed or removed. It is the inalienable right of every man. It is a gift of God.

But the guarantee of these liberties did not end with the adopting of this amendment. Someone has said that "eternal vigilance is the price of freedom." From the day that our founding fathers bought freedom with their blood, event to this hour the

foes of freedom have continued to press their cause, under first one guise and then another—statism, communism, or some other “ism.” Not since 1781 has America’s freedom been so threatened as it is at this very hour.

The one issue which towers above all others is freedom. In the holy place of the secret ballot there is but

one question for you and me. How may this freedom be best safeguarded? Who is best qualified by experience and outlook to lead our nation in preserving that which makes America unique among the nations of the earth? No other person can answer that question for you. You alone can decide, under the guidance of God.

OPPORTUNITY RAPIDLY FADES

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of Israel. She was founded by Jeroboam I in rebellion against threatened exorbitant taxation and oppression at the hand of Rehoboam, the son of Solomon. The infant nation was wrapped in the swaddling clothes of human dignity and laid in the cradle of freedom. No sooner than done, however, the nation took its first decided step away from Jehovah. In order to break his people’s ties with Jerusalem, Jeroboam built altars at Bethel and Dan as substitutes for Jerusalem as a place of the worship of Jehovah. These altars were destined to become pagan altars as the people gradually went after the gods of the land. With the loss of their oneness with Jehovah came the loss of all human, moral, and spiritual values and ideals. The result was oppression, corruption, and defiance of every law of Jehovah. With the loss of her purpose of being came the end of her right to continue to be.

This is the picture of the summer fruit. The best fruit is gone. Only the poor, useless, rotting fruit remains. The harvest is almost at an end. Israel will soon be no more.

In one of the most thought-provoking articles of recent date, one of America’s best thinkers described the

United States as a nation without a purpose. It caused one’s mind to hark back to the Pilgrim fathers, the Declaration of Independence, the pioneers, and the Gettysburg Address. These typify a people with a purpose. They suggest geographical, intellectual, and spiritual frontiers which ever beckoned to greater endeavor and achievement. But somewhere along the line the horizons closed in, the ship that once with full sail ploughed through the waves found itself in the dead calm of a silent sea. The conquistadors stacked their arms, furled their flags, and bivouacked under the cover of night.

Gone is the purpose of being. Dimmed is the heavenly vision. Lost in the darkness is the horizon of God’s beckoning will and way.

What is America offering to God today that He cannot find elsewhere in the earth? Has the best fruit been plucked? Does He come seeking luscious grapes only to find that they have rotted with age? Is our nation but a basket of summer fruit?

If so, hear the word of the Lord! *“The end is come upon my people Israel; I will not again pass by them any more”* (Amos 8:2). The mills of God grind slowly, but they grind ex-

ceedingly small. The sun past its zenith may move downward slowly, imperceptibly, but it moves toward the sunset. At a time when we think not it could suddenly plummet us into twilight, and, after that, the dark.

SINFUL NEGLECT

SECOND, consider the sinful neglect. In this time of summer fruit what were the people of Israel doing? Amos 8:4 introduces us to a pitiful scene. "Hear this, O ye that swallow up the needy, even to make the poor of the land to fail." Then follows a scene of inordinate desire and greed. When they lost their vision of God's purpose, they turned their vision inward toward selfish ends. With their nation in the last throes of death, the people's one desire was the accumulation of ill-gotten wealth. In Amos 8:5 the prophet quotes their own words. Freely rendered they

said, "When will the religious feast of the new moon and the sabbath day be passed that we may sell corn and wheat, selling small measures and false weights for big prices?" Solemnly God swears, "Surely I will not forget any of their works" (8:7).

Then follows His pronouncement of destruction (8:8-10). The land will tremble and the people will mourn as destruction comes upon them as the flooding of the Nile River covers the land of Egypt. Note verses 9-10. "And it shall come to pass in that day . . . that I will cause the sun to go down at noon . . . and I will make . . . the end thereof as a bitter day." While the people thought that the nation's sun was at its zenith, suddenly it dropped behind the horizon, ushering in the night.

It takes little change in names and dates to bring this scene up to date. With the loss of a national purpose

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what is the primary concern of the average man today? Is it international affairs? But you leave that to the United Nations. Is it domestic problems? But you point to the elected officials. Is it spiritual decline at home and abroad? But you blame that on the preachers and the churches. **What is your primary concern?** Judging by the conduct of the average man, it is to get yours while the getting is good. More and more business men do not even wait for the sabbath to pass. It is rapidly becoming a business-as-usual day.

PLEASURE AND PROFIT

You can hardly get the pumpkin out of the window to put the Christmas decorations and goods in. Easter and Mother's Day join with Thanksgiving and Christmas as great commercial adventures to the loss of their spiritual intent. Clashes between va-

rious segments of society become tugs of war either to get or to keep. Selfish gratification expresses itself not only in economic and social problems but in the moral aspects of life. For millions of people life becomes one mad rush after pleasure and profit.

Such an attitude has always been the harbinger of the downfall of nations. Genesis 6:5 describes Noah's day. *"And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination [the purposes and desires] of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually [every day]."* The leaders of Babylon revelled in lewd drunkenness, defiling the sacred vessels of God, while the enemy stood before the gates of the city. Rome was drowned in a debauch of wine and wealth. Modern nations have fallen not from outward force but from inner decay. One modern historian says that no

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major fallen nation was ever murdered. Each committed suicide.

You and I would do well to recall God's word to Israel. *"I will cause the sun to go down at noon . . . and I will make . . . the end thereof as a bitter day."* You think our nation's sun is at its zenith. Beware, lest it go down suddenly at noon. Opportunity rapidly fades. It may be later than you think!

THE CERTAIN END

THIRD, note the certain end. Concluding this chapter, Amos speaks of a famine, not of bread or water, but of the hearing of the words of Jehovah. The king may ignore Amos. The people may spurn his warning, Amaziah the priest may even invite him to leave the land. But God's word is sure. What is involved in Amos' picture of a famine of the hearing of God's words? The point

is that they may ignore God's words now. But when calamity comes they will long for some word from the Lord. But no word will be heard. Even their places of worship will *"fall, and never rise again"* (8:14).

A nation or a man may ignore God's Word, but one does so to his own hurt. The fall of Nazi Germany is vivid in memory. But where did this fall begin? Not with Adolph Hitler or allied bombs. It began in the latter half of the eighteenth century with the rise of a school of thought which practically castigated the Bible as of no divine origin or message. This evolved into a nation which plunged the world into three wars, two of worldwide scope. The last one brought a mighty nation to the greatest destruction of modern times.

Does someone say, "Yes, but we do not so regard the Bible?" Perhaps not in word or deed, but what about

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attitude? Some who hear me can recall when to quote the Bible in a court of justice in support of a case was to shut off all debate. Men lived by the Bible. It was read and studied in the home. Utterances from the pulpit carried ponderous weight.

Such is no longer true. The Bible may be the best seller. But it is not the most read. Nor does it furnish the accepted blue print for society or for personal living. To it is paid lip service. But it is largely forgotten in the broad avenues of daily living. The popular preacher is not the one who declares without fear or favor the whole counsel of God. Someone said that a preacher can preach against sin with impunity, if he does not name it. But when he calls its name and points out its abiding place, that is another matter altogether.

But God says that to ignore the teachings of His Word leads only to destruction. You can laugh it off now as you plunge further into sinful and selfish living. But the time will come when the "hearing of the words of the Lord" will be more precious than bread in a famine or water in the desert. But they will not be heard. Note that God did not speak of a famine of the words of the Lord, but of the "hearing of the words of the Lord." God's Word will still be here, but you will not hear it.

Isaiah 6:9 tells the story. "Hear ye indeed, but understand not; and see ye indeed, but perceive not." You cannot trifle with God's message. To do so petrifies your ears and makes blind your eyes. Your heart becomes so hardened that you may hear God's Word, but cannot understand. You may read its pages but not perceive its message for you. God will still love and long to help. But you cannot respond in such way as to receive it. Either a man or a nation can commit the unpardonable sin,

not because God is not mighty and willing to save, but because man or a nation is hardened and unwilling to trust.

For this reason God repeatedly says, "Today if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts . . ." (Heb. 3:7-8).

The Corruption of Wealth

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garded may become the root of many good things.

The story is told of Dr. George W. Truett coming to his deacons with this request. "One of our fine young men has just inherited a large fortune. Let us pray for him, because he will need it."

The positive teachings of the Bible concerning wealth may be summed up in three terse statements: make money honestly; use money wisely; dedicate money religiously.

PERNICIOUS EVIL

SECOND, consider the pernicious evil. Micah did not condemn these Jerusalem business men for being wealthy. His condemnation was concerning the manner in which they acquired and regarded their wealth. In Micah 2:1-2 he says, "Woe to them that devise iniquity, and work evil upon their beds! when the morning is light, they practise it, because it is in the power of their hand. And they covet fields, and take them by violence; and houses, and take them away: so they oppress [defraud] a man and his house, even a man and his heritage." In short, these business men lay in their beds at night scheming and plotting. As soon as it was morning they put these schemes into action as they defrauded the poor