

Country Preacher Who Came to Town

by J. Vernon McGee

The sermon explores the life of Amos, a country preacher who boldly delivered God's message despite facing cultural opposition in Bethel.

Duration: 47:53

Scripture: Genesis 12:1, Exodus 2:10, Amos 5:18-19, Amos 7:13-15, Micah 5:2

Topics: "Christian Life"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher discusses the days of Jeroboam and the prosperity that came to the land. The people were living in luxury, lying on beds of ivory and eating the finest meats. They were also indulging in music and excessive drinking. The preacher emphasizes that while God is merciful and forgives sinners, He will still punish sin. The message is relevant for today's society, urging people to turn to God and avoid the destruction that comes from continuing in sin.

Transcript

O thou seer, go flee thee away into the land of Judah, and there eat bread, and prophesy there. But prophesy not again any more at Bethel, for it's the king's chapel, and it's the king's court. Then answered Amos, and said to Amaziah, I was no prophet, neither was I a prophet's son, but I was an herdman and a gatherer of Sycamore fruit.

And the Lord took me as I followed the flock, and the Lord said unto me, Go, prophesy unto my people Israel. Our subject this morning is the country preacher who came to town. Six miles south of Jerusalem is little Bethlehem.

Little Bethlehem has become famous. It was the city of David. It was the city where our Lord was born.

And before long now we'll be singing, O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie. It is the little town that Micah, eight hundred years before he was born, said, Though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of these shall he come forth. The little town that's six miles south of Jerusalem.

Six miles south of Jerusalem is Tekoa. Somebody says, but I never heard of it. And little wonder that you haven't heard of it.

Actually it's a wide place in the road. It's a whistle stop on a branch line. It's a ghost town today.

It's a country place. It always was a country place. It means a camping ground.

And it wasn't much more than that even in its heyday. It's actually, using the common colloquialism of the day, it's the jumping off place. And it actually was just that.

I heard a man say years ago that where he was born that you go as far as you can in a buggy, then you get off and walk two miles. That's Tekoa. Tekoa is the birthplace of Amos.

That's where he was born. Amos the prophet was born in Tekoa. And by the way, that's the only claim that little town has to greatness.

It's true that one of the mighty men of David was born there, but that never gave it to any character or any notoriety at all. But Amos was born in Tekoa. And the very interesting thing is that Tekoa is on the edge of the most frightful wilderness that there is in the world today even.

It's that wilderness that extends down to the Dead Sea, going down and down and down. Tekoa is on a ridge overlooking that wilderness, and you can stand there and see all the way to the Dead Sea. The fact of the matter is you can turn and look in the other direction on the other side of the ridge toward Hebron, down into the Negev, and you've got more wilderness.

Any way you turn, there's wilderness. But that wilderness down toward the Dead Sea is the most frightful one of all. It's a desert wilderness where wild animals howl at night.

And by day, the only thing that you can see is the ground spotted where there is the remains of a camp of those that were Bedouins that passed through that land. They don't stay there. They don't live there.

Just the blackened ground of a nomad, a vagabond of the desert, passing through, not staying in that place. It's a desert jungle. It's Dr. Adam Smith who says, the men of Tekoa looked out upon a desolate and haggard world.

That's the picture. You couldn't live in a worse place than Tekoa, my friend. And this was the hometown of Amos the prophet.

He tells us that he was a herdman. And the word that's used here for herdman or shepherd is an unusual word. It actually has to do with the sheep that he was herding.

Peculiar type of sheep, if you please. They were sheep that bred only in the desert. They're a scrub type, a hardy, rugged type of sheep.

That's the only kind that could live down in that desert. But they were noted for their fine wool. And I'm told that even today you can see the Bedouins with that same kind of sheep in that same wilderness today.

This man Amos was a--he was a herdman down in that frightful desert. He tells us something else that he did, because this man didn't make very much. He was a--well, he tells us he's a gatherer of sycamore fruit.

Actually, the word is he was a pincher of the sycamores. And that means this. These sycamores, they grew at a lower level than tequoas.

Actually, they are a kind of a fig. The tree goes tall, very thick foliage. And this fruit is not the best fruit, and it doesn't ripen very easy, so you have to go and pinch it in order to make it ripen.

That's what this man did. If I may pay my respects to the mission to the migrants, Amos was the first migrant. That's what he was, a fruit picker, if you please, and a herdman out there.

He was--he was from the country, my friend. His sheep and his sycamores pushed him way out into that desert. In other words, he really wasn't from town.

He didn't come from the town of Tequoa. That had been bad enough. He'd have been a country boy had he come from Tequoa, but he came from way out yonder in that wilderness.

That's the picture that we have before us here. Amos was really from the country. He's really from the farm, if you please.

He was a country rube. He was a rustic. He was a yokel.

He's a hayseed, if you please. But don't let that fool you. This man Amos, the prophet, had the greatest worldview than any of the prophets had.

He's not a fool. And just because you don't like the way he dresses and you don't like where he came from, remember this man has a message. And he has the ecumenical message, a worldwide viewpoint.

My beloved, will you listen to him? In verse 15 of the seventh chapter he says, And the Lord took me as I followed the flock, and the Lord said unto me, Go prophesy unto my people Israel. God's seminary has always been in the solitude of the desert. That's where God has always trained his man from the very beginning.

If you go back to Abraham, when God at the very beginning called this man out, he was a city slicker from Ur of the Chaldees. But God called him and we find him right near this wilderness, in another wilderness, near Hebron. And that's where that man was alone with God, and that's where he reared his altar to God, out yonder in a wilderness.

For that's where God trains his man. It seems to be his method. And then Moses, raised, if you please, in a palace, educated in the greatest university of the day, and it would compare favorably to USC.

They didn't haze anybody to University of the Sun. Their students were on a very high level, and they knew a great deal. This man Moses was a graduate of the Temple of the Sun.

But God couldn't use him. So God sent him out to the backside of the desert of Midian, and for forty years God trained him. That's God's method.

David was a shepherd boy, brought as a musician into the palace of Saul, but God can't let him be educated there. God could never use him. He'd become soft, and he'd wear soft raiment, for that's what our Lord said they do in king's houses.

But not this man. God sends him back out yonder to the caves and the deserts in order that he might train a king, in order that he might be used. Elijah walks into the court of Ahab and Jezebel and says, except by my word there won't be rain now.

But God says, I want you to get out of here. This is no place for my man. I need to train you.

And God sent him down to the brook Kirith, and that was in the desert, if you please, my beloved. God's method has been to train his men like that. And John the Baptist was out in the desert until his appearing to the nation, and John the apostle was put on the Isle of Patmos so God could give him the book of Revelation.

It's God's method. God called Amos to preach, and God gave him a message out on the desert, and then God sent him to Bethel to preach. And when he arrived, everybody smiled.

Because actually, friends, Amos is from the country. I think he had on his first pair of high-button yellow shoes, and every opportunity he got he'd take them off because they hurt. And he was wearing his first necktie, and he was always loosening it because he'd never worn a necktie before.

But when you go up to Bethel, you have to have a necktie, you know. And so this man, he arrived, and everybody is embarrassed. The pulpit committee especially was embarrassed.

They had heard he was a great preacher, but they didn't know he was the country. Everybody was embarrassed except Amos, and he wasn't embarrassed. He came up to give God's message, and he's going to give God's message.

You see, Bethel was the capital of the northern kingdom. That's where Jeroboam had put the golden calves. That's where false religion was.

And it was the center of culture, it's true. It was the center of the cults, that's true. Bethel was sophisticated.

They were blase. They were uptown. They were really citified in Bethel.

And so this man, Amos, arrives in town, and Bethel is the intellectual center. What Bethel did was the thing to do. What styles that they wore in Bethel were imitated.

This is the center as influence. And the suit of Amos was not cut according to the pattern of Bethel. And by the way, his sermons weren't cut according to the pattern of Bethel either, because we're going to see that this man had a slight difficulty when he arrived.

I think he was quite a sight when he arrived in town. This man now has--he's left the backwoods and he's come to the boulevards. He's left the desert of Tekoa, and he's come now to the drawing rooms of Bethel.

He's out of place. He knew all about raising long-haired sheep, but he didn't know much about these well-groomed sleek sheep that he had to speak to in Bethel. He had come into the city of culture.

Bethel, he had left the country of agriculture. The country preacher has come to town. Now, most everyone came to hear him at first, because word got around.

They said, if you really want to be entertained, you go hear him. You ought to see the suit he's wearing. Where did he get that necktie? Did you ever see anybody's country as Amos? They came for amusement, but they all left angry, at least most of them did.

He was a sensational preacher. Now, I know today that the great many preachers say, I do not like sensational subjects, and I do not like sensational preaching. The reason they don't, they can't do it.

Amos could, and he's sensational. Amos came and he preached the word of God. People were moved.

A few turned to God, and the city was stirred. Bethel was stirred. You know what happened, don't you? Always happens.

Happened then, it happens today. Organized religion tried to silence him. They tried to run him out of town.

They said, we don't want to hear him. And the denominational leaders, they called a meeting, and they said, we've got to remove him. We'll withdraw our support from him.

Have you talked to him about that he's going to lose his pension if he doesn't stop this type of preaching? We don't preach this way in Bethel. You can't preach like that. Even some of the fundamental leaders, evangelicals as they happily call themselves, they were jealous, and they began to criticize.

They tried to undermine his ministry. They circulated false reports about him. But in spite of it all, God blessed him.

And this man wouldn't compromise. He wouldn't shut his eyes to evil. I want us to see briefly his message in a moment.

I don't have time today to deal with his message. Mr. O will do that on Thursday night, but his message is sensational. They finally called a mass meeting of all the false religions, and their motto was, away with Amos.

That was their motto. And placards were carried, Go home, Amos. We don't want you here anymore.

And so they decided they'd appoint someone to go and talk to him. They appointed Amaziah, the false priest, the hired hand of idolatry. They appointed him to go and wait upon Amos.

I think he's one of the biggest rascals you'll find on the page of scripture or off of scripture. He's Amaziah. He's clever.

You see, he's an ecclesiastical politician. And so he moved very cleverly. These boys always move cleverly.

I know them, my beloved. I've been moving among them for one quarter of a century. And this is what they did.

Very clever they are. This man Amos is a strong preacher. He doesn't mince words.

He doesn't pull his punches. He speaks what God has him to say, and he says it. And he had said some strong things.

Now this is what he said, and the high places of Isaac shall be desolate, and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste, and I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword. Now watch this rascal, this religious leader, Amaziah. Then Amaziah the priest of Bethel sent to Jeroboam, king of Israel, saying, Amos hath conspired against thee.

In the midst of the house of Israel, the land's not able to bear all his words. Now listen to what he said, For thus Amos saith, Jeroboam shall die with the sword. I ask you, is that what Amos had said? No, he hadn't

said that.

What he said was, God said, I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword. And if you follow the record, this man happened to be accurate. It's too bad Jeroboam II here didn't believe him, because his grandson is slain with the sword, and that ends the line.

But he did not say that Jeroboam would perish with the sword. You see, these ecclesiastical politicians, they twist the truth. He had said something about the sword, and he had said something about Jeroboam, but he had not said that Jeroboam would perish with the sword.

And this kind of lying, my friend, is the worst kind of lie. You see what Amaziah is doing? He's getting the authorities on his side before he moves in on the prophet. And candidly, I'm of the opinion--I may be wrong here, now this I can't prove.

Up to this point I'm on scriptural grounds. But from here, from the next few moments, this is merely my surmising. I do not think he went alone.

These men do not move alone. They move by committees. And I think that he took a committee with him.

And I can tell you who was on the committee. I got inside information. There was a committee of three with Brother Amaziah being the chairman, and Dr. Sounding Brass was on the committee.

He was president of the School of the Prophets, false prophets. He was pompous and proud, and he was an ecclesiastical politician to his fingertips. He couldn't preach, but he was teaching other young men how to preach.

Then there was Reverend Tinkling Symbol. He was pastor of the wealthiest, most influential church in Bethel. He was the yes-man of the rich.

He couldn't preach either, but he was a great little mixer. Oh, he was great at shaking hands and patting on the back and going to the knife and fork clubs. He belonged to all of them.

And if the company was just right, he didn't mind taking a cocktail. You see, he's pleasing everybody. Here's the committee.

Amaziah, the priest of a calf, Dr. Sounding Brass, and Reverend Tinkling Symbol. This is the committee that waited on Amos. Oh, my friend, what a scene.

Here is our prophet. He's God's man. He was striking.

He didn't have the latest haircut. He didn't have the latest suit. He's country.

There he is. He is accustomed to the desert, but he's not accustomed, if you please, to the drawing room and committee meetings. And he's just a little crude, I must confess.

Here come the committee. They waited on Amos. Amaziah is polished, cultured, educated, scholarly, with biting sarcasm and with the rapier of reddenitude.

And he assumes a condescending attitude. And he has a superior manner about him as he comes to this prophet. Now, will you listen to what he said? Oh, thou seer.

Oh, that's just filled with sarcasm. The word for seer means, really, you don't really call yourself a preacher, do you? Oh, thou seer, who told you that you were a preacher? Where is your degree? Where did you go to school? Who ordained you? Where were you pastor last, and why did you leave? Oh, thou seer. He says now, go, leave thee away.

You know, these ecclesiastical politicians, they are very polite on the surface. Oh, but they can be ugly underneath. Go, leave thee away.

Get out of town. Get lost. We don't want you here any more.

And then he makes the nastiest insinuation that any man can make. Will you listen to him here? And there eat bread. After all, you're doing this for the money.

And if you'll go back to your own hometown, you probably will be able to get good offerings there. Why don't you leave here? Isn't that an awful thing to say to this man? And then here is his crowning insult. But prophesy not again any more at Bethel, for it's the king's chapel, and it's the king's court.

Oh, how satirical he is at this juncture. He said, do you realize, Amos, you're no preacher? Do you realize that you are preaching here at the First Bacterian Church, and that this is the most important and prominent church in the denomination or in this area? Did you know that the king attends Sherry's Pews right out there? And your messages have been disturbing him. He likes to come and nap, and he hasn't been able to sleep with you preaching.

And some of the people don't like you. You don't flatter them enough. You don't mix well, Amos.

And then, Amos, you're not as dignified as you should be. We've noticed that you pound the pulpit. That's very crude in Bethel.

We never get excited about religion here. We do not like these emotional outbursts that you have. By the way, Amos, did you ever take homiletics? Your messages do not seem to be organized, and you need a course in public speaking where you can speak with a deep voice in a very dignified manner.

You can say nothing as if it's something. Amos, you're not welcome here anymore. Now, Amos answered him, will you listen to this prophet? Then answered Amos and said to Amaziah, listen to this.

I was no prophet, neither was I a prophet's son, but I was a herdman and a gatherer of sycamore fruit. And the Lord took me as I followed the flock, and the Lord said to me, go prophesying to my people Israel. Friends, that's not the answer of a fanatic, is it? It's a soft answer.

It's not harsh. You may think he's crude because the way he dresses, but he's not crude. Look, read his answer.

I tell you, after all of these years, over twenty-five hundred years, he stands in better light than Amaziah. It's a lovely answer he gives, and it's such a wonderful answer. I have only one criticism to make of Amos, and I trust you'll forgive me for even making this one.

You know what his trouble is? He's too naive. He's too simple. He's artless.

He's frank. He's just a babe in the woods in Bethel. Down yonder in the desert jungle of Tekoa, he knew his way around.

He could go through that desert at night watching the stars. Read his prophecy, and you'll find out he knew all about those stars. He knew how to guide himself through the darkness.

He knew when he heard the roar of a lion, for he tells us about it. And he could hear the awful scream of some helpless animal, and then the lion would roar. He knew that some little helpless animal had fallen into the clutches of the lion, and this man knew how to avoid that, and he went around.

He knew when he heard a certain movement in the brush and a hiss that it was a serpent. May I say to you that he was at home in the jungle filled with wild animals, but in the asphalt jungle of Bethel, he was helpless. In the fundamental jungle, he didn't know what to do because he thought everybody was like he was, honest and sincere and said exactly what they thought.

He didn't know that people put up a front. He didn't know that they talked to you back. He didn't say, isn't he naive? He wouldn't last in Los Angeles six months.

You've got to be smarter than that to live in Los Angeles. You have to lead him about. In fundamental circles, a minister said to me the other day, he says, there are certain groups of Christians that you're not safe to be in that group.

That's true, and it's awful. If somebody will just lead Amos around. And Amos, there's the roar of a lion.

Roar of a lion? I don't hear the roar of a lion. I know lions. Yes, but that's a lion up here in Bethel.

That's Mr. Gotthrox. And he didn't like that message you gave because you really got after him. The shoe fitted him, and he didn't like it.

And he's a lion. He has influence. He ain't sharp.

Amos says, you don't mean to tell me that a Christian brother, why, I'm giving God's message. He wouldn't eat me up, would he? Oh, Amos, don't be so naive. He'll crush you if he gets the chance.

Be careful, Amos. Don't step there. You almost stepped on a serpent.

A serpent? He says, I don't see a serpent. All I see is Mrs. Jo Doakes. You don't mean to tell me.

Yes, she's a serpent. In this asphalt jungle, the poison of ass are under her lips. And with her tongue, she's used deceit.

And she has bitten many people and poisoned many people. Be careful, Amos. You don't mean to tell me.

I didn't know Christians act like that. Isn't he simple? He doesn't know his way around, this fellow Amos. Doesn't at all.

But will you listen to his credentials? The Lord took me as I followed the flock, and the Lord said unto me, go prophesy unto my people. Listen to him, will you? Amos said, I never claimed to be a preacher. I'd really never went to any of the schools of the prophets.

And homiletics, by the way, what is homiletics? I never heard of it. All I know was, I was down yonder in that wilderness of Tekoa. I'd been walking with God.

And one day he called me, and he gave me a message. And his message was like a burning fire in my bones. And he said, go to Bethel and deliver it.

That's what I've done. You're not angry, are you? You really wanted to hear God's word, didn't you? You preachers that have come, you're not against God's word, are you? Oh, Amos, how can you be so naive? They don't want the word of God in Bethel, and they don't want the message you're giving. Briefly, I can't deal with this, but let me just say this in closing.

The message he gave, he preached against sins. I asked Brother Rodeheaver, when I was with him at Wynona Lake on one occasion, because we like to know, we preachers, how other men are used to God. I said, you were with Billy Sunday a long time.

What was the secret of that man's ministry? I'd like to know. And I never shall forget. We were sitting at the table.

Rodeheaver put down his knife and fork, for he was carving the roast. He put down his knife and fork, and he reached over in his very lovely, winsome manner. He tapped me on the arm.

He says, Billy Sunday preached against sins. And he says, the trouble today is preachers don't preach against sins. I haven't forgotten that.

Amos knew this before Billy Sunday did. He preached against sins. He was no mealy-mouthed preacher.

He did not give out messages of saccharine sweetness, artificial light, and synthetic bread. He gave the real article. God to him was a God of love, but he was not soft and sentimental and shallow.

He was a God that punished sin. He never dealt with any vague generalities. I heard this said of a preacher not long ago.

It says that he preaches like this, very indefinite. You must repent, as it were, believe in a measure, or be lost to some extent. Oh, how indefinite preaching can be, my beloved.

This man Amos went right to the point. And there are three areas in which he spoke. I mention them and pass on.

Out of these three situations in his land, he brought a message. It was a day of prosperity. It was a day in which he could say, woe unto you that are at ease in Zion.

And then he could move in from there, because in the days of Jeroboam II, great prosperity had come to that land, and the people were living in luxury. You find, as you turn here to verse 4 of chapter 6, that lie upon beds of ivory and stretch themselves upon their couches and eat the lambs out of the flock and the calves out of the midst of the stall. They had filet mignon one night, and the next night they had lamb chops, and everything was foam rubber.

It was a great day. And it was a day of prosperity. And he says, that chant to the sound of the vial, that's an interesting word in the Hebrew that he uses.

It actually means it was the rock and roll of the day. And you invent to themselves instruments of music. You come up with a saxophone, and the guitar, and you've got all kinds of things that will take you away from God.

And then the third thing, that drink wine in bowls. You're not satisfied with a little glass, you drink it in bowls. A day of drunkenness.

May I say that the message of Amos is a modern message. These are the things that are destroying America today. Prosperity that's brought luxury and plenty.

And our music today gives us away. And we are becoming a nation of drunkards. No one is crying out.

Then it was a day of false peace. This man Amos came in. It was a day in which they said yonder in the north was hanging Assyria like the sword of Damocles, ready to pounce, and was in the next half century was to destroy this little kingdom.

They tried to ignore it, and they kept talking about peace. And they started a United Nations, and they invited Mr. Khrushchev down from Assyria. And he came down, and they went and begged him.

A great many have attempted to interpret the visit of Mr. Khrushchev. I guess it's all right if I try to for a moment. I tell you, I think that it was America saying to him, please, Mr. Khrushchev, let us alone.

We are nice people. We won't hurt you. We shut our eyes when you murdered them by the hundreds in Hungary.

We have shut our eyes to all of your sins. Just let us alone. We want to have peace and plenty and go on in our sin.

Amos said, you can't do that. And the reason that you can't do that, he says, how can two walk together except they be agreed? You've got to agree. And he says, how are you going to walk with God? And he says, behold, the eyes of the Lord, God, are upon the sinful kingdom, and I will destroy it from off the face of the earth.

His message is not a popular message. It's a message that God intends to punish sin. And just because they happen to be living in plenty and talking peace and were being religious on the surface, didn't mean that God was not going to judge sin he intended to move in upon.

But this man had a worldview, and I conclude with this verse. Chapter 9, verse 11, In that day will I raise up the tabernacle of David that's fallen down, close up the breaches thereof, and I'll raise up his ruins, I'll build it as the days of old. May I say to you that this man looked down into the future, and he saw that God by mercy and by grace and by redemption was going to yet redeem his people.

He saw something that James, at that great council of Jerusalem, when James wanted to quote a scripture, he did not go to Isaiah, he didn't go to David, and he didn't go to Moses. He went to this man Amos and said, God has said that he will return and build the tabernacle of David. But that which Amos did not see, James says, now we see that out of the Gentiles he's going to call a people to his name.

And just as he's dealt with us a nation in mercy, he's going to deal with all peoples in mercy if they'll have it. And he can be merciful because our Lord, when he came to Zion, was not at ease. He said, there my father worketh, hitherto and I work.

It was there that he wept over Jerusalem. It's there where they beat him. It's there where they led him out of the city.

It's there where they crucified him. He was not at ease in Zion, and he wasn't at ease so that this morning God might be merciful and bring rest to you. He died there.

He was not at ease because God is not willing that any should perish. But they will perish if they'll not have his mercy. That's the simple message of Amos.

God will punish sin. He hasn't changed. He's the same yesterday, today, and forever.

But he says, come now and let us reason together, saith the Lord. Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be white as snow. Though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.

My friend, don't laugh at the country preacher. He's got a message from God. And a lot of the sophisticates in that day were wrong.

The intellectuals were wrong. They can be wrong today. God still says, come now, let us reason together.

Come unto me, all ye that labor in a heavy laden. I'll rest you, rest of redemption. But be not deceived.

God is not soft. God is not sentimental. God will still punish sin, but he'll forgive the sinner.

Shall we pray? With our eyes closed, heads bowed in prayer, in this closing moment today, are you here today to hear the message of this country preacher from Toccoa long, long ago? But it's a modern message, a message for the streets of Los Angeles, for the campuses of our universities, for our places of business, our aircraft plants, for the missile range. This is a message for today. God will destroy the nation and the individual that goes on in sin.

But God will save, by his mercy, those that will turn unto him. Are you here today, friend, and you've never yet availed yourself of this mercy? You've never turned to this wonderful God. Doesn't it make sense today for you to turn to him while you can?

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