

Amos 3:1-15 (1984 NIV)

Taking Our Divine Privilege Seriously

Introduction

Amos the man

- Amos came to Israel from Tekoa in Judah in the south.
- His chief occupation was that of a shepherd.
- He also had a secondary occupation—i.e. tending of sycamore trees.
- He was neither the son of a prophet nor a priest.
- Rather, he was a layman who received a vision from God, and went to Israel in the north to prophesy the words of God.
- He confronted the northern people for their sin and warned against their complacency, idolatry, and oppression of the poor.

The setting

- Israel was in her golden years.
- The wealthy grew wealthier but the poor became poorer.
- There was widespread injustice as the rich gained economic advantages and exploited the poor.
- This period was also marked by great religious activities—worship centres, sacrifices, and offerings were aplenty.
- But the religious fervour of the people failed to impact the spiritual quality of their daily lives—there was much injustice, inhumanity, and unconcern for the needy, and moral decadence was unparalleled in Israel's history.

The theme

- In light of this setting, Amos pronounced God's judgment first on all the surrounding nations, and then on Judah and Israel.
- Thus, the book portrays God as in sovereign control of all nations and each person is accountable to Him.
- The main point is this—we all must answer to God for how we live.

Indeed, we still need to hear the message of Amos today because our situation today is very much like that of Israel in Amos' time.

- We are much blessed materially and have much freedom of worship.
- When the northern people in Israel were enjoying all these during Amos' time, they were so hyper-religious yet so faithless—what an irony!
- So the message of Amos reminds the Israelites of old and us today that when much is given to us by God, much is expected from us by Him.
- Whatever God has given us (material or otherwise), He expects us to use them faithfully.

- The northern Israelites in Amos' time were negligent in doing this, and the result was that God took everything away from them, even their own homeland when the Assyrians deported them out of their country in 722 B.C.

When much is given to God's people by Him, much is expected from His people by Him. The Israelites in Amos' time allowed themselves to forget this to their own detriment. In our text today, Amos gives us three reminders to help us take our privilege as God's chosen and blessed people seriously.

The first reminder is ...

I. Our privilege comes with responsibility.

Amos 3:2a reads:

2a You only have I chosen of all the families of the earth ...

God chose Israel as His people.

- It was a promise first declared to Abraham, the forefather of the Israelites (Gen. 12:2, 3).
- In this promise, it was also declared that God would let Himself be known to other nations through Israel.
- Just as Israel was privileged to be chosen by God as His people in the OT, Christian believers individually and the Christian church communally are privileged today to be worshippers, workers, and witnesses of and in God's Kingdom.
- The word "chosen" comes from the root word "to know" in Hebrew.
- Thus, the word "chosen" implies an intimacy comparable to that experienced in a marital relationship—like the experientially intimate knowledge that spouses have concerning each other.
- We can say that God knew Israel as His people like no other nation in that He purposed for Israel like He purposed for no other people.
- Israel was the instrument that God would use to reveal Himself to all humanity.
- The word "chosen" also implies that Israel knew God by way of special events—like the Exodus (God's deliverance of Israel out of Egypt), the Law (God's covenant with Israel), and the Promised Land of Canaan (God's provision of a homeland for Israel).
- All these point to Israel as a privileged nation—God knew her in a special way, and Israel also knew God in a unique way like no other nation.

You and I are God's people today.

- We are known by God, and God makes Himself known to us.
- This speaks of our privilege of having a personal and intimate relationship with God.

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- This is a privilege not only because it allows us to know God personally and intimately, but also to be used by God for His purpose.
- Thus, we are to view our privilege as God's people not so much in terms of the freedom to enjoy the blessings He has given us in the way we like, but in terms of the freedom we have to enjoy and use God's blessings in the way He has purposed.
- God blesses us so that He can stir us to be His partners, not to spoil us to be His pets.
- The Israelites in Amos' time really enjoyed all that God was blessing them with.
- Sadly, they became complacent and negligent of God's purpose for and through them.
- They enjoyed what they had to the empty end because God later took away all that they had—as prophesied by Amos—when the Assyrians conquered them.

The solemn reality is that the privileged of every generation often face the temptation to ignore or neglect the responsibility that comes with that privilege.

- The privileged may be tempted to think that their blessedness is a personal blessing to be used only for their own individual pleasure and profit—this will lead to self-indulgence.
- The privileged may be tempted to think that they are better and more deserving than others because of their blessedness—this will lead to self-importance.
- The privileged may be tempted to think that they are beyond the laws of responsibility and judgment because of their blessedness—this will lead to self-exaltation.

The Israelites in Amos' time succumbed to all these temptations.

- They reasoned that the blessings of God were strictly for their personal enjoyment.
- They believed that they were of greater worth to God than the other nations.
- They believed that they were outside the reach of God's judgment—as His chosen people, they presumed that they were also God's favoured people.

Amos disagreed with them with God's words in v. 2b—"... therefore I will punish you for all your sins."

- Amos contended that the Israelites were more responsible than other nations because of their privilege of knowing God and His purpose.
- Note God's very strong words through Amos—"I will punish you for all your sins."
- Essentially, God said this to the Israelites in Amos' time—"You have been privileged to be chosen to know me personally and intimately as

my people. You have been blessed by me so that you can be my light before the nations. But you have not lived up to the responsibility that comes with this privilege. Therefore, I will punish you for all your sins."

Today, we are God's people privileged to know Him and be blessed by Him so that we can be His light to others—to point others to God so that they too may know Him as their God. We are blessed by God so that we can enjoy His blessings (spiritual or material), as well as employ these blessings to touch others with the same grace, love, and mercy that He has for us.

Indeed, when much is given to us by God, much is expected from us by God. And Amos helps us take this seriously by first reminding us that our privilege as God's people comes with the responsibility to bless others just as He has blessed us. Indeed, we are blessed by God to be a blessing to others.

A second reminder that Amos has for us in our text today is ...

II. Our privilege challenges a self-centred lifestyle.

The responsibility of Israel's privileged status as God's people was to live by a higher standard. But the sad thing in 3:9-10 is that we hear Amos calling the other nations, who had been Israel's enemies and who lived by a different standard, to assemble and observe the moral decadence in Israel. This implies that the Israelites as the chosen people of God had failed to live by the higher standard expected of them.

Amos 3:9-10 reads:

9 Proclaim to the fortresses of Ashdod and to the fortresses of Egypt: "Assemble yourselves on the mountains of Samaria; see the great unrest within her and the oppression among her people." 10 "They do not know how to do right," declares the Lord, "who hoard plunder and loot in their fortresses."

Now, Israel was not dominated by any foreign power at that time. The nation had great freedom and prosperity then to do many things for God. However, the people decided to use their abundance to advance only their personal profit, interest, and pleasure—they cheated, lusted, betrayed, and victimised.

In other words, the Israelites abused their privilege as God's people. Instead of seeking to do the purpose of God—i.e. to testify for God to the nations with love for God and others—they were seeking to gratify their self-desire for more. They hoarded, plundered, and looted though they already had been blessed with plenty.

We face this same danger today too. Yes, we do have personal needs that God wants us to take care of. But if we become obsessed with solely seeking our own profit, interest, and pleasure, we become ensnared in selfishness and greed. We do not know how to share with others and when to say "enough is

enough". Such misplaced priorities can lead to missing the purpose that God has for us as His blessed people.

Purpose and priority must go hand-in-hand.

- To see the purpose yet have no priority for it can only mean we are happy to be non-committal—like in our marriage, or our walk with God, or our church.
- The question is—"How far can we be true to a purpose without commitment to it?"
- As we are blessed in various ways by God, we don't argue that it is still God's purpose for us to seek Him above anything else, to serve one another and not only our own interests, and to share the Good News of Jesus Christ and not keep it to ourselves.
- Indeed, it is our privilege as God's people to be His partners in fulfilling His purpose for and through us. Our privilege as God's people calls us to live by a standard that shows care and concern for others, and not just ourselves. We are blessed by God to be a blessing to others.
- We abuse this privilege as God's people when we become preoccupied with self-centredness and self-gratification (like the Israelites in Amos' time); when we desire to be pampered by God with what we want than to be partners with Him in what He had purposed through us for others' sake.

As far as God was concerned, Israel was a very defiant people during Amos' time.

- They created unrest, oppressed and marginalised others, did not do right, plundered, and looted.
- They had no priority at all for what it meant to be God's people reaching out to the other nations.
- Rather it was each man for himself with no genuine concern for others, and even for God.

So, let us be cautioned of this same ungodly defiance today as God's people. Such a defiance begins with precarious attitudes like:

- The attitude of selfishness—"Don't ask me to share. I want it only for myself."
- The attitude of stubbornness—"Don't try to stop me. I will do whatever it takes to get it."
- The attitude of indifference—"I don't care who is hurting. The important thing is that I am happy."
- The attitude of contempt—"I am not concerned with what God has to say. I am the best person to know what is good for me."

Ralph Winter, a renowned missiologist in the US, once coined the term "world Christian".

- He defines a “world Christian” as one who evangelises his community and missionizes the world by his witness, his giving and prayer.
- Such a Christian has his eyes open to the needs of his community and the world, and he has a sense of urgency about meeting these needs.
- The “world Christian” sees beyond his own needs and determines the relevance and usefulness of his activities by asking, “If not I, who? If not now, when?”

I believe there is tremendous challenge in being a “world Christian”. It is a heavy responsibility to being a “world Christian” as opposed to being a “worldly Christian”, and many may feel more comfortable being the latter rather than the former. The challenge in being a “world Christian” is taunting because it calls us to look beyond ourselves and give priority to the purpose of God for us and through us to reach out to others.

The human tendency is so much bent towards watching out for ourselves rather than for others. The privilege we have as God’s people is not only to give priority to the importance of self, but also to look out for the needs of others around us with what God has blessed us. We are to let God be the centre and direct all that we do for Him, for ourselves, and for others.

When much is given to us by God, much is expected from us by Him. That’s our privilege with a calling—we are chosen and blessed by God to be a channel of blessing to others. And our text solemnly reminds us that this is very much against the grain of human tendency because it challenges a self-centred lifestyle. Thus the more we are blessed, the more we need to seek God to guard and guide our heart against self-centredness.

A third and final reminder in Amos 3 that helps us take our privilege as God’s people seriously is ...

III. Our privilege requires accountability before God.

Let’s now look at vv. 11-15.

11 You trample on the poor and force him to give you grain. Therefore, though you have built stone mansions, you will not live in them; though you have planted lush vineyards, you will not drink their wine. 12 For I know how many are your offenses and how great your sins. You oppress the righteous and take bribes and you deprive the poor of justice in the courts. 13 Therefore the prudent man keeps quiet in such times, for the times are evil. 14 Seek good, not evil, that you may live. Then the Lord God Almighty will be with you, just as you say he is. 15 Hate evil, love good; maintain justice in the courts. Perhaps the Lord God Almighty will have mercy on the remnant of Joseph.

God’s words through the prophet Amos in these verses were meant to warn Israel that He would not keep a blind eye to the abuse of their privileged status. God would use a powerful enemy to overrun the land of the Israelites.

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- This enemy would pull down the strongholds of Israel and plunder their land (v. 11).
- The destruction would be of such magnitude that only a small segment of the nation would escape—like a lion pouncing on a sheep/lamb and eating up all but “two leg bones or a piece of an ear” (v. 12).
- Even the altars of Bethel would be destroyed (v. 14).
- Bethel was the centre of the religious establishment in Israel during that time—Bethel means “House of God”, but sadly, it stood for religion gone bad at that time because of the rampant idolatry then.
- Thus, even the religious establishment could not provide security for the people on that day of destruction.
- Yes, Israel would have no escape at all.
- Not only would Israel lose their place of worship, but also their place of pleasure—winter house, summer house, ivory houses, mansions—i.e. be stripped naked materially (v. 15).

This prophecy came to pass in 722 B.C. when Israel fell to the Assyrians.

- God did not keep a blind eye anymore.
- He took all away from them when He allowed the Assyrians to ransack Israel and send the people into exile.
- The Israelites lost their possessions, pride, dignity, and land.

We have an accountability before God concerning how we use what He has blessed us with. Ignoring this accountability will bring on God’s displeasure, and He will not keep a blind eye to it.

We thank God for blessing us with:

- The family we have.
- The job we have.
- The possessions we have.
- The friends we have.
- The church we have.
- The giftedness we have.
- The godly people we know.
- The peace, stability, and prosperity we enjoy.

Even as we thank God for all these blessings, how then are we using them to bless others and beyond ourselves?

Let’s all learn to be constantly challenged and reminded to use all these blessings to fulfil God’s purpose for us to seek Him, serve others, and share Christ. Just a little more of our willingness; just a little more of our effort is all that is needed for us to see what God can do in and through us.

Indeed, the solemn reminder for us here is that we are accountable to God and He does not keep a blind eye to us blatantly abusing the privilege of being blessed to be a blessing to others here on earth.

Conclusion

The privilege we have as God's people is that when much is given, much will be expected. Today, our text in Amos gives us three reminders to help us take our position of privilege seriously.

- One, our privilege comes with responsibility.
- Two, our privilege challenges a self-centred lifestyle.
- Three, our privilege requires accountability before God.

As we are blessed by God, spiritually and materially, we are to please Him by being true to our privilege as His people with a calling—i.e. we are blessed by God to be a blessing to others.

God help us. Amen!