

*“Do not pray for the well-being of this people” Jer. 14:11*

### 1. The Experience of Amos

Amos, like all true prophets was essentially a man of prayer, and he knew how to intercede: he knew how to bring the nation before God when God was threatening it with judgement so that God might have mercy on its people. There was an expectation on God’s part that his prophet would intercede in this way. Indeed a prophet only heard what God had to say to the nation because he or she was a person of prayer and had a concern for the nation. The gift of prophecy always comes out of the life of prayer, particularly prayer which has the needs of others as its focus. **It was, then, a matter of huge significance when Amos was actually prevented by God from interceding for Israel. He was stopping his prophet in one of his prime functions.** He was commanded to take a message of judgement to Judah but not allowed to ask God to spare the nation. We have to ask why that happened, and under what circumstances God refused to hear intercession for a nation. We also have to ask if there is any prayer that can be made after such a prohibition. The questions are not academic but very much a part of our experience today. We face precisely that situation.

We read in Amos of two successful periods of intercession followed by a definite refusal of God to listen to any more. (7:1-9). Those two successful intercessions involved two separate judgements that God was preparing. First, God spoke to Amos about swarms of locusts that were to come on the land just as the main harvest crop was about to be reaped. The land was to be stripped clean and the whole harvest devoured. Amos saw this very vividly (probably in some visual form). It made him cry out in horror, for he saw that the people would never survive such an affliction. He begged God to show mercy and forgive the people. God listened to him and told him that the judgement would be stopped. (This is a perfect picture of intercession: someone who knows what is to happen to a guilty but unaware people, and who stands before God and pleads for them that they may be spared.) The second judgement that Amos saw coming from God was a judgement by fire which dried up the waters and “devoured the land”. It is very difficult to be precise about what this literally signified; perhaps Amos himself only saw it symbolically as something devastating. What it did signify, however, was that the land would not survive. This, like the first vision, was of an overwhelming judgement. Again Amos cried out in horror, pleaded for mercy and again God heard him and relented. Amos’ intercession again saved Israel from total destruction. It is an amazing testimony to the power of intercession. This second occasion on which Amos prevailed for Israel through intercession inevitably makes us wonder how many times in fact he had interceded and brought relief to Israel. Israel would, of course, have known little about such prayer.

Amos, however, received a third vision. It had none of the horrific imagery of the first two, but was far more deadly. Amos simply saw the LORD standing with a plumb line; the interpretation of the vision was that his people were no longer “true to plumb”, and God would “*spare them no longer*”. Whereas the LORD had listened to the previous intercession of Amos and spared the nation, he would not do so any more. Indeed God went on to tell Amos what he would do: “*The high places of Isaac will be destroyed and the sanctuaries of Israel will be ruined; Jeroboam will die by the sword and Israel will surely go into exile, away from their native land*” (7:9-11). War, destruction and exile would come. This message was re-enforced by a fourth vision (8:1-2) This vision was of a basket of ripe fruit, and the interpretation was simply that the time was ripe for the people to be judged severely; they could be spared no longer. This double word was in effect a declaration to Amos that God would not listen to any cry on their behalf. It was a clear statement that he was not prepared to go on sparing them even if intercession was made. The day of reckoning had come. Accordingly, unlike the first two visions, we read of no further record of Amos crying out and pleading with God. There is a resounding silence. All that remains for Amos is to affirm the word of judgement to the nation even more strongly than before and to call for repentance.

### 2. The Experience of Jeremiah

Amos was not alone in this experience – it is even more evident in the ministry of Jeremiah who a century or more later faced a rebellious Judah, Israel’s sister nation . On no less than four separate occasions Jeremiah was told specifically not to pray for the people. We have a lengthy record of him interceding with God over a severe drought that had come on Judah (Jer. 14 & 15). Again it is a model of intercession; he shows great compassion and concern for the people, he acknowledges the sins that have brought about the drought, and he expresses great faith in the ability of Judah’s God to deliver, if not for the sake of the people at least for his own honour (14:7-10 & 19-22). God meets this intercession, however, with the words, “*Do not pray for the well-being of this people. Although they fast, I will not listen to their cry; though they offer burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Instead, I will destroy them with the sword, famine and plague.*” (14:11-12). Despite this prohibition, Jeremiah breaks out again in intercession, whereupon God speaks even more firmly that he must cease: “*Even if Moses and Samuel were to stand before me, my heart would not go out to this people. Send them away from my presence! Let them go!*” On two other occasions Jeremiah received exactly the same prohibition, once when he was proclaiming judgement at the gate of the Temple (7:16), and once as he did the same in Jerusalem and the towns of Judah (11:14). The embargo was very clear!

**Jeremiah, Amos,  
Ezekiel, Habakkuk;  
all are prevented from  
interceding**

### 3. Other Prophets are Forbidden to Intercede

Ezekiel and Habakkuk were fellow prophets with Jeremiah in God’s attempt to warn Judah of its coming doom. Each likewise found their intercessory work was stopped by God.

**Ezekiel** was called to prophesy after he had been taken into exile by the Babylonians as a hostage with the leaders of Jerusalem in 597, ten years before the city and its inhabitants was completely destroyed and the main exile took place. His work during those ten years was to speak from exile against the sins of Judah and warn of the coming total catastrophe, making plain

to those already in exile that they would not go back quickly. God spoke clearly to him during those years in the same way that he had spoken to Jeremiah: *“The word of the LORD came to me: “Son of man, if a country sins against me by being unfaithful and I stretch out my hand against it to cut off its food supply and send famine upon it and kill its men and their animals, even if these three men—Noah, Daniel and Job (all righteous intercessors)—were in it, they could save only themselves by their righteousness, declares the Sovereign LORD..... “How much worse will it be when I send against Jerusalem my four dreadful judgements—sword and famine and wild beasts and plague—to kill its men and their animals! (Ez.14:12-21). Ezekiel realized that God was saying to him there was nothing in the way of intercession that he could do for those left in Jerusalem; the die was cast.*

The book of **Habakkuk** begins with the prophet characteristically interceding for Judah. He complains that he has prayed and prayed against the evil in the land, asking God to remove it, but God has done nothing. He wants to know why? (Hab. 1:2-4) God replies that he will deal with the evil, but in a way that will bring complete devastation on the land, not in a way that will allow the nation to continue as it is (as Habakkuk had hoped). He showed Habakkuk that the Babylonians would overrun Judah. Habakkuk realized that his intercession for the nation did not meet the real situation: it was too late for God simply to remove evil doers and let the nation live in peace. He, like Jeremiah, could not pray for the aversion of disaster.

#### **4. Why did God Reject Intercession?**

What had happened to the two nations of Israel and Judah that these prophets sent by God to warn them of their danger, could no longer intercede against national disaster? Why such a chilling prohibition of their prayer? Jeremiah provides the answer very clearly. God said to him, *“Go up and down the streets of Jerusalem, look around and consider, search through her squares. If you can find but one person who deals honestly and seeks the truth, I will forgive this city (Jer. 5:1)”. Elsewhere God told him, “Judah’s sin is engraved with an iron tool, inscribed with a flint point, on the tablets of their hearts and on the horns of their altars. Even their children remember their altars and Asherah poles beside the spreading trees and on the high hills (Jer. 17:1)., The fact was that the nation had become hardened in its sin. God would have been prepared to listen to intercession and spare them the worst judgements if they had listened to his first warnings about their evil behaviour and showed some sign of repentance. That, however, was clearly not going to happen. Evil was in the nation’s bloodstream: all were infected, rich and poor alike. Judah was even worse than Israel, for Judah had witnessed what had happened to Israel a century before and refused to learn the lesson. Clearly this was a time for the nation when devastatingly severe judgement could no longer be held off, no matter who interceded.*

**What hope, then, was left for Judah and Israel?** Amos cried out, *“Seek me and live” – repentance alone would count in Israel. God spoke to Jeremiah at the potter’s house where he watched the potter at work refashioning some marred clay: “O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter does?” declares the LORD. “Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned (18:6-8). It is clear from this that the only hope left for Judah was repentance. The only work left for the prophet was to speak out the word of judgement in order to give a spur to repentance. It is interesting to see that the words of the prophets seem to take on an even sharper note concerning judgement after intercession is forbidden.*

#### **5. What Prayer could the Prophets Offer?**

If the prophets could no longer intercede for their respective nations, was there any way left in which they could pray? That was the problem they faced. It’s the problem that all intercessors have to face when they sense a similar embargo on their intercession. **It is precisely the problem that praying people face now in our own nation, for the “Amos word”, “I will spare them no longer” is among us.** The last chapter of the book of Habakkuk is called “A prayer of Habakkuk” and is very instructive at this point, for he is praying after God had showed him he could not pray for the sparing of the nation. It begins with the words, *“LORD, I have heard of your fame; I stand in awe of your deeds, O LORD. Renew them in our day, in our time make them known; in wrath remember mercy”.* There are two petitions here; first a petition that God will renew his mighty deeds now (*“in our day”*), and second, that God will still show mercy in wrath.

**“In wrath,  
remember mercy”**

The starting point of these two petitions is an acceptance of the coming wrath or judgement of God. That is shown by the fact that he is seeking mercy in the midst of wrath. He is not seeking to avert that wrath. But even if the nation, as a nation, must go under and suffer bitterly, he believed there was still room for the mercy of God to work in some way or another. The nation may go under, but individuals remain upon whom mercy may be visited. **“In wrath, remember mercy”** is, then, the vital prayer that remains for the prophet. It is a critical prayer for any intercessor to remember. To be precise about this prayer we could say that it was in a sense still intercessory, but not in the sense of a prayer pleading for or expecting the deliverance of a nation from wrath.

If we link these two petitions together we might well conclude that the mercy Habakkuk had in mind was actually to be in the form of a renewal of God’s *“mighty deeds”*. The verses which follow this prayer recall those mighty deeds and they all describe God moving powerfully for the deliverance of his people (3:3-15). It would seem the prophet has in mind, therefore, national deliverance even through and beyond the trauma of destruction and exile: he appears to have a vision of a future for Judah beyond the judgements, and prays for that. Even today, as was the case then, there can be a future beyond the worst judgements God announces on the nations. All hope is not lost! Restoration is a great prophetic theme.

#### **A Final Prayer**

Habakkuk concludes his prayer with quivering heart: he is likely himself to walk through judgement. But he has listened to God and he knows that Judah’s conqueror, Babylon, will itself be destroyed. He composes his heart to await that day, determined to continue to rejoice in his God (3:16-19). He personally will look to God for strength whatever is to come upon Judah. When caught up in the midst of God’s judgements (as the righteous undoubtedly will be), there could be no better prayer than that indicated by Habakkuk.