

We're in a series on a little-known book in the Old Testament called Amos. God sent Amos as a messenger to God's people, the nation of Israel. God's original covenant with Israel was designed to help them to be a light in the darkness of the world. They were supposed to embody God's way to the people around them, to show the nations of the world that God's way is better, that God's Law leads to life, and everything else leads to death.

But by Amos' time, in 750 BC, God's people weren't living that way. They were exploiting people around them, worshiping idols, and generally not showing God's way. They were darkness in the midst of darkness. Throughout this series, we've been looking at oracles of God's judgment Amos delivered to Israel. Amos pictured God as a lion standing on Mt. Zion, roaring out judgment against Israel's broken, sinful lifestyle.

And this hasn't just been a history lesson. We've been comparing ourselves to Israel, courageously examining how closely our lives reflect Israel's sins. Because we know that Israel didn't heed God's warning, so they were destroyed by the Assyrian Empire only a couple of decades later.

We want to avoid that same fate. We want to live up to our calling, to be God's people in this world, the light that points our world back to God. We don't want to experience God's judgment on our lives the way Israel did.

God's judgment is a scary thing to consider. Anytime a national tragedy strikes, there're always people ready to claim it's God judging us. So when 9/11 happened, Katrina or Sandy. The earthquake in Haiti. Or on a more personal level, we often think of the bad things happening in our lives as God punishing us. So if we get an illness or lose a job or something like that, we wonder, Did I do something wrong? Is God judging me?

And to complicate it more, some who experience those tough times, those personal or national tragedies claim they're blessings. Some claim losing a job or getting cancer or losing a home was the best thing that ever happened to them, that their judgment was a wake-up call and they wouldn't trade it for a million bucks.

So which is it? Are tough times blessings or judgments?

According to Amos, judgment *is* blessing. God sending judgment on us can very well be the best thing to happen to us. It makes sense if you remember that judgment in the biblical world was based in the world of the family, not of the courtroom. When God judges us, it's correction, restoration. The point of God's judgment is always to bring about repentance and restoration. So in that sense, God's judgment is blessing.

But what makes the difference for us - whether we experience God's judgment as blessing or curse - has to do with our own character. The question we want to ask ourselves today is, How am I preparing myself for judgment?

My cousin Tanner is a freshman at Ohio State. A couple of weeks ago, he decided to run a marathon there with a couple of his friends. He's in ROTC, so he's in pretty good shape - apparently good enough shape that he decided he didn't need to train at all for the marathon. Then, as if that weren't enough, he and his friends agreed to ride their bicycles to the race.

Which means they'd also have to bike home. After running 26.2 miles.

When he told his dad his plan, his dad said, I don't think that's such a good idea. Why don't you let me meet you at the finish line with my truck. I'll drive you and the bikes home.

My cousin said, No thanks.

You know how this story ends, right? After the race, he couldn't even walk for at least half an hour. And then he and his friends had to ride their bikes back home. He said it was one of the worst, most painful experiences of his life.

Now, compare that with many of my other friends who've run marathons. Sure, it's hard. Their bodies hurt afterwards. But they consider it a good experience. Hard, yes. Painful, yes. But good. Why? What's the difference?

Mostly, it's the way they prepared themselves. It's how their internal character was prepared for the external circumstances.

That's not how we think of judgment. We think that judgment is something that happens OUT THERE, not something contingent on IN HERE. But look what Amos does in Chapter 7. In this series of visions, Amos takes our normal conceptions of judgment and flips them on their head:

The Sovereign LORD showed me a vision. I saw him preparing to send a vast swarm of locusts over the land. This was after the king's share had been harvested from the fields and as the main crop was coming up. In my vision the locusts ate every green plant in sight. Then I said, "O Sovereign LORD, please forgive us or we will not survive, for Israel is so small." So the LORD relented from this plan. "I will not do it," he said.

Then the Sovereign LORD showed me another vision. I saw him preparing to punish his people with a great fire. The fire had burned up the depths of the sea and was devouring the entire land. Then I said, "O Sovereign LORD, please stop or we will not survive, for Israel is so small." Then the LORD relented from this plan, too. "I will not do that either," said the Sovereign LORD. -- Amos 7:1-6

These first two visions are pretty straight forward. God is going to send some sort of natural disaster on Israel as a judgment. Amos intercedes, begs God not to do it and God agrees, changes his mind. These are the sorts of judgments we're used to working through, the way we expect judgment to work. God sends something, it hurts us.

But in both visions, Amos appeals to God's mercy. God cancels the plans. Why? Amos is setting us for a very different picture of judgment than what we're used to. He goes on in verse 7:

Then he showed me another vision. I saw the Lord standing beside a wall that had been built using a plumb line. He was using a plumb line to see if it was still straight. And the LORD said to me, "Amos, what do you see?" I answered, "A plumb line." And the Lord replied, "I will test my people with this plumb line. I will no longer ignore all their sins. The pagan shrines of your ancestors will be ruined, and the temples of Israel will be destroyed; I will bring the dynasty of King Jeroboam to a sudden end." -- Amos 7:7-9 (NLT)

The tone of this vision is totally different. God shows Amos a wall that represents Israel and says, Amos, I'm going to test my people with this plumb line. I'm going to see if they are up to snuff. Of course, we know they're not. They're not worshipping God at all. They're not keeping God's Way, they're exploiting the people around them who have less, everything we've been looking at over the last couple of weeks.

And Amos pictures that as a crooked wall. What an odd picture. But at least part of the metaphor makes sense... God has a Way we were created to live, and Israel isn't "measuring up". They're crooked, they've deviated from the Way. The wall of their lives isn't built according to God's building code. [[use Sheila's blocks here](#)]

So God is like a contractor, coming in to see if Israel is up to Code. God has sent Amos as the Plumb Line. Throughout the book, Amos has been measuring Israel against God's Code and has found them lacking again and again.

So the image is helpful, even if it's a little weird. But there's something more about God using a crooked wall to represent our sinfulness. There's a reason we have Building Codes, a reason you don't build a home with crooked walls: if the wall is crooked, the home will collapse. A crooked wall can't bear the weight it's supposed to bear.

A crooked wall isn't really a wall, at least not in any useful sense of the word.

So if your character is crooked, if you're deviating from God's Way, then you aren't strong enough to bear up under the weight of Life, of Reality. God can stop the storms, the plagues, but God can't stop crooked. If your character is malformed, if you're not strong enough to endure the weight of existence, what is God supposed to do?

Living life without attention to our character formation is like building a house with no regard for building codes. Living without character is like my cousin trying to run a marathon without training. It hurts. It's awful.

And God sees us, like his dad saw him, and says, This isn't a good idea. You're heading for a world of hurt. Let me help you. Do this my way.

But too often we ignore God. We say, No, I've got this. I'll do it my own way. So our character is malformed, misshapen. We're not prepared for life. So we buckle under the weight of life.

That storms will come is inevitable. Jesus promises as much in a famous parable he tells in the Sermon on the Mount:

Anyone who listens to my teaching and follows it is wise, like a person who builds a house on solid rock. Though the rain comes in torrents and the floodwaters rise and the winds beat against that house, it won't collapse because it is built on bedrock. But anyone who hears my teaching and ignores it is foolish, like a person who builds a house on sand. When the rains and floods come and the winds beat against that house, it will collapse with a mighty crash. -- Matthew 7:24-27 (NLT)

Two homes. Two buildings. One on a foundation, one built according to code, and one not. Storms come to both. Notice Jesus didn't say, The one who built his house on the bedrock didn't experience

storms. He didn't say, Only people who don't build according to code go through storms. He said, when you build well, when you live your life according to the Code, you're strong enough to weather the storms.

Paul says the same in his letter to the Corinthians. In chapter 3, he compares us to buildings, just like Amos did:

You are God's building. Because of God's grace to me, I have laid the foundation like an expert builder. Now others are building on it. But whoever is building on this foundation must be very careful. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one we already have-- Jesus Christ.

Note that Paul echoes Jesus: Jesus' teachings are the foundation we build on, the Code we follow in crafting our lives. He goes on:

Anyone who builds on that foundation may use a variety of materials-- gold, silver, jewels, wood, hay, or straw. But on the judgment day, fire will reveal what kind of work each builder has done. The fire will show if a person's work has any value. If the work survives, that builder will receive a reward. But if the work is burned up, the builder will suffer great loss. The builder will be saved, but like someone barely escaping through a wall of flames. -- 1 Corinthians 3:9-15 (NLT)

Paul asks us to consider what we're building our lives out of. Is it strong enough to withstand the flames of judgment? Are our building materials strong enough to endure the storms that come in life?

Amos, Jesus and Paul all see that bad times are inevitable. Following Jesus isn't some sort of "Get Out of Bad Stuff" pass. We know that Jesus was crucified, so how we ever got the idea that people who follow Jesus don't have to suffer is beyond me.

But will you experience that bad stuff as painful judgment or painful blessing? Will you experience the marathon of life as a horrible trial or an excellent achievement? Will the trials we endure make us better or break us?

The answer to that lies in our character. If we're building our lives according to the Gospel Way of Jesus, then we will be strong enough to endure whatever storms come our way. We will pass through the flames of testing and come out shining like the sun.

But if we are like Israel, if we are not following the Way of God, if we're not putting in the hard work of pursuing the formation of our Character, not actively seeking out how to look more like Jesus, then our lives will not be such that can bear the weight of the storms that come in our lives.

So the question is: Will you be like crooked Israel, or will you do the difficult necessary work of straightening out your life? [hold up the plumb line] God has given us a Way, a standard against which to measure ourselves: no less than the person and work of Jesus himself. God cared so much that we get this right that God became one of us. God said, I'm not just going to *tell* you my way. I'm going to *show* you my Way. I'm going to show you what a straight, just, merciful, humble life looks like. I'm going to show you how to live a life that bears the weight of the world.

Jesus is our plumb line. The Scriptures reveal the Word of God to us, the Way we are called to live.

So will you take this opportunity to measure yourself against God's Code? Will you hold the plumb line of the Scriptures up to your own life? Will you compare yourself to Jesus, to see what you're building with?

Let's remember that God does not judge us because God hates us. In fact, the Scriptures tell us that when God judges us it's the discipline of a loving parent. We can celebrate trials as blessings, because they make us better, help us look more like Jesus. They tear down the rotten, crooked places in our lives so we can build better character.

We are running a marathon. And we want to be prepared, to run well. Everyone knows marathons are hard. Let's listen to the author of Hebrews, who challenges us to

Let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up. And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us. We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, the champion who initiates and perfects our faith. -- Hebrews 12:1-2 (NLT)

We have a holy calling: we are to be God's presence in this world. A light shining out in the darkness, a city on a hill. And we cannot be that light, that city, unless we're built on the foundation of Jesus. Unless we live our lives according to God's Way, build our character according to God's code, we will collapse under the storms.

Will the race be a great experience, or the worst of your life? Will we experience God's judgment as pain or discipline? Will it destroy us or make us better? The difference between those two responses is our character.

Communion Set Up

Today, we close with the Communion Meal. This is our opportunity to come before God. To consider seriously if we measure up, if we've built our lives according to God's Code, God's Way. The good news is that if your life doesn't measure up, if your character is crooked, if you're not strong enough to endure the storms that are coming, Jesus offers you a fresh start.

We eat this bread to remember that his body was broken for us, for our malformed character. We drink the wine (grape juice) to remember that his blood was poured out to offer us a stronger foundation, a better place to start building.

When you come to the tables today, you'll find a piece of string and washer. Make yourself a plumb line, and as you do, take the opportunity to examine your life. Where are you living like Jesus? And where don't you measure up?

As you hold the plumb line, what are the steps you need to take this week to form your character, to become strong enough to endure the storms that are coming?

Prayer