



Central
Peninsula
Church

...to make and mature more followers of Christ

A New Perspective on Prayer

Amos 7:1–9

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series: Prayers Of Our Fathers

This morning we are continuing in our series, “Prayers of our Fathers.” It’s our hope that this series has been helpful to you and encouraged you in your prayer life. I know I need all the encouragement I can get when it comes to prayer. I have to admit that I’m not the most prolific pray-er around. I believe that a big reason for that has been my perspective on prayer.

See if you can relate to me. I tend to often view prayer as something that “I need,” “I should” or “am supposed to do.” I can even find myself with the mindset of, “Why bother praying if God is going to do what He thinks is best.” Now don’t get me wrong, we do need and want to pray, and as a Christian, I need to pray in order to keep my spiritual journey vibrant and have God intervene in life for my ministry, others and myself.

The problem is that this “I’m supposed to” or “I need to” or “I should pray” attitude can breed a staleness and even boredom. And who wants to do something that can be boring or monotonous? I believe that the posture we as Christians must take in regards to how we view prayer should be one of it being an invitation by God to join Him in the ongoing process of fulfilling His purposes. You see, when we are invited to be a part of something rather than feeling obligated to be a part of something, we are far more inclined to be passionate about it.

I see this in my ministry here at CPC with high school students. We have new students show up on Sunday morning almost every week. We have two types of visitors. The first are those that come alone because their parents are over here and those that come with a friend that has invited them. The students that show up alone walk in pretty quiet and reserved. They sometimes sing. They are engaged but kind of half-heartedly.

Now contrast that with the students that come with a friend that has invited them. Their friend introduces them to other students and adults. They are way more likely to participate enthusiastically as they watch their friend that brought them participate in a game and sing during worship. They just seem to have an overall better experience because their friend invited them.

Prayer is to be that way. It is to be seen as an invitation by God to join Him in the ongoing process of fulfilling His purposes. But what does that look like? To join God in a way that captures our enthusiasm and pulls us in to His work? The passage we are looking at today gives us a great look at this principle.

Turn to the book of Amos, chapter 7. Let me give you a little background. Amos was written around 750 BC when Israel was divided into two nations. Judah to the south and Israel to the north. Each had their own king. Jeroboam was king of Israel in the north and Uzziah was the king of Judah in the south. Amos was a shepherd from Judah in the south who was sent by God to prophesy to the people in the north. It was in a way a performance review on how well they had been obedient to God and His laws.

Now you need to understand what the condition of Israel was at this time. The first six chapters of Amos give a detailed description of their condition. They were very religious, but mixed in the pagan religious practices of the surrounding nations. They were actually just going through the religious motions. *“I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring me choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them. Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps”* (Amos 5:21–23).

They were prospering economically and politically, almost to the height of the golden age of Solomon a few hundred years earlier. Their lives were marked by extravagant indulgences and luxurious living. *“You lie on beds inlaid with ivory and lounge on your couches. You dine on choice lambs and fatted calves. You strum away on your harps like David and improvise on musical instruments. You drink wine by the bowlful and use the finest lotions”* (Amos 6:4–6).

Now, as what often happens with prosperity, came moral decay – idol worship, sexual immorality, greed, neglecting God’s word, and specifically noted often in the book of Amos was social injustice – namely the neglecting of the poor.

Look at chapter 2. *“This is what the Lord says: ‘For three sins of Israel, even for four, I will not turn back my wrath. They sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals. They trample on the heads of the poor as upon the dust of the ground and deny justice to the oppressed. Father and son use the same girl and so profane the holy name.’ The rich were getting richer while neglecting and even using and abusing the poor to get richer”* (verses 6–8). Even their leadership was corrupt. As for their king, 2 Kings 11:24 says, *“He did evil in the eyes of the Lord...”*

Now really, Amos could have been walking through any of our cities today. Yet if he were here today, Amos would be addressing the church. This book is addressed to God's people. It's really a warning shot to God's people throughout all time.

So that's the backdrop of what we will be looking at this morning. In this chapter, God shows Amos how He is going to judge Israel for their disobedience. Now if anyone was to still have any reservations as to why Israel shouldn't be judged by God, it's important to understand God's expectations of His people. God's covenant with Israel required loyalty to God and love towards one's fellow man. It's the same for us as believers today. God's desire for His people is stated in Amos 5:24, ***"But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream."*** That's His desire for us. If God is truly a righteous and just God, then there must be judgment when He is disobeyed. Just like when we break man's laws we are judged.

Let's start in verse 1. ***"This is what the sovereign Lord showed me:"*** You are going to notice that this phrase ***"Sovereign Lord"*** is repeated many times. In some of your versions it says, "Lord God." It's the same meaning. If something is repeated again and again in scripture it is worth sitting up and taking note. What Amos is saying here is that he fully understands who God is. That He has the absolute right to do all things according to His own pleasure. He is the one that holds Israel's and our destiny in His hands.

He goes on, ***"He was preparing swarms of locusts after the king's share had been harvested and just as the second crop was coming up."*** What Amos sees is that God is preparing swarms of locust to wipe out Israel's crops. To add insult to injury, it was the part of the crop that grew only after the first harvest that was given to the king as taxes for his use. This would create a famine and ultimately wipe out the people. This judgment was focused on the common people, to wipe them out.

Verse 2 shows how Amos responds to this vision. ***"When they had stripped the land clean, I cried out 'Sovereign Lord, forgive! How can Jacob survive? He is so small.'"*** Notice two things in this verse. First, Amos asks God to forgive. This is an appeal by Amos to God's mercy. This is another aspect of God's character that is so important for us to remember. He, by His very nature, is merciful. So Amos feels free to appeal for mercy for the people.

The other thing is the reference to Jacob. This seems to represent a reference to Jacob before God renamed him Israel and revealed His promise to make him a great nation. Amos is emphasizing to God that the nation of Israel was so small, so infinitesimal compared to who God was and what He was proposing to do that it would surely wipe the people off the earth.

Now notice in verse 3 God's response to Amos; ***"So the Lord relented. 'This will not happen' the Lord said."*** God relented from His plan in response to Amos's request. To relent means, "To

soften in feeling, temper, or determination; become more mild, compassionate, or forgiving." What a contrast. Do you think Amos was surprised at God's response? Would you or I be if we were in his sandals? So, does this mean that God changed His mind? We will look at that question in a few minutes.

Verse 4 goes on, ***"This is what the Sovereign Lord showed me: The Sovereign Lord was calling for judgment by fire; it dried up the great deep and devoured the land."*** The fire literally licks up the water and scorches everything on the land. Once again, total devastation of all of their resources for survival.

Verse 5 is Amos' response. ***"Then I cried out, Sovereign Lord, I beg you, stop! How can Jacob survive? He is so small."*** Can you imagine how Amos is feeling at this moment? "Hey wait God, don't just forgive them and relent, stop what you are planning to do! This will completely wipe your people out!" He is agonizing over what God is showing him He is going to do.

Have you ever felt that way? You see the direction someone is headed with the choices they are making or where your life's circumstances seem to be taking you and your only response is, "No Lord, I beg you, stop!" I felt this way years ago when I was going through a deep depression. My life seemed out of control. Anxiety ruled my life for a short period. As I thought of the direction this depression was taking me, all I could do was cry out, "No Lord, I beg you, stop this!" This is what Amos was feeling.

In verse 6 God responds just like earlier. ***"So the Lord relented. 'This will not happen either,' the Sovereign Lord said."*** Once again, the Lord relents of His plan.

Let's now look at God's third judgment starting in verse 7. ***"This is what He showed me: The Lord was standing by a wall that had been built true to plumb, with a plumb line in His hand. And the Lord asked me, 'What do you see, Amos?' 'A plumb line,' I replied. Then the Lord said, 'Look, I am setting a plumb line among my people Israel; I will spare them no longer.'"*** In these verses, God shows Amos a wall that He is standing by that was built true to plumb while He is holding a plumb line. A plumb line is used to make sure something is exactly vertical. In this case it's God standard. He is using this picture to show Amos how far out of plumb or how far off they were from God's standard.

And what is that standard? Leviticus 19:2 says, ***"Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy."*** To be holy means to be set apart. God's people were to be set apart in the way they lived, thought, acted and responded to God. The same is true for Christians today. We are to be set apart from the world's values. We are to measure ourselves against God's standards. Especially in the small areas. Sin is a slippery slope.

By the way, did you notice how God addresses His people as **Israel** and not **Jacob** like Amos did earlier? They are not just a band of people descended from a shepherd as Amos tried to por-

tray them. They are His chosen people who have enjoyed all the rights and benefits of God's protection and mercy.

"I will spare them no longer" means that God has had enough of their rebellion and in His sovereignty is going to judge them. A lesson here might be that you never know how long God is going to hold out in judging a nation or someone for his or her rebellion. God is merciful but He is also just. These attributes must go hand in hand if God is truly good.

Now God imparts His final judgment in verse 9. **"The high places of Isaac will be destroyed and the sanctuaries of Israel will be ruined; with my sword I will rise against the house of Jeroboam."** The high places of Isaac were originally places of worship to God that had become places of pagan worship. And the sanctuaries were places of political decision-making since religion and society were very mixed together. This is saying that the centers of religious and political self-righteous pride would be wiped out along with the death of their king and the beginning of them being overthrown and taken captive.

Notice in verse 11 where it says, **"Jeroboam will die by the sword and Israel will surely go into exile, away from their native land."** In not too many years, Israel will be invaded by the Assyrian empire and taken off into captivity.

Now notice that Amos doesn't ask for God to relent. When Israel is measured by God's standard, they stand guilty. They had neglected God for so long. Stuart Briscoe says, "If you do not heed the word of God, it's only a matter of time before you will no longer hear the word of God."

Notice also that God still judges Israel. He goes a lot easier on them than stated in the first two visions. Instead of total destruction of the people, He destroys their symbols and places of false worship and their leadership and ultimately their freedom. It's important to remember that God judges sin. To what extent is His decision. It was God's intention all along to judge Israel for their disobedience. He just had a lesson for Amos and us to learn.

So why didn't God just reveal this third and final judgment to Amos instead of doing the whole locust and fire routine? A better question is, "What does this story tell us about God?" "What is He trying to say?" Well, first I believe that God is revealing here for us some of the most dynamic aspects of His character, that when focused on can help us tremendously in our prayer life.

The first aspect is God's Sovereignty. God being sovereign simply means that He has the absolute right and ability to do all things according to His will. It means that all things are under His rule and control, and that nothing happens without His direction or permission. Psalm 115:3 says, **"Our God is in heaven, He does whatever He pleases."**

In this passage we see Amos recognizing God's sovereignty each time he addresses God. Amos acknowledges that God has the ability and right to judge His people however He sees fit and that nothing can happen without His direction or permission. As a follower of Christ, you and I don't ever have to worry that God might allow something to harm us or difficulty to come upon us that He is not in direct control over. Focusing on God's sovereignty helps us to pray more according to His will and not ours.

The second aspect of God's character that we see in this passage is God's holiness. In this passage we see God holding His people to a standard of holiness. He still holds us to that standard today. This is not about being good or obedient in order to earn God's favor. That's religion. As we focus on God's holiness during prayer, as we keep in mind that picture of the plumb wall, we will be continually prompted to not only ask for forgiveness but to pray for the strength through Jesus to be more holy, as He is holy. Leviticus 19:2, **"Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy."** Isn't that what we want most as Christians? To live a life that pleases our heavenly Father?

The third aspect of God's character that we see is God's mercy. We see God's mercy in how He ultimately deals with Israel. Instead of completely wiping them out, He spares them to be able to come back years later and rebuild and renew their relationship with Him. You and I deserve judgment. As we stand next to the plumb wall of God's holy standard we can't help but recognize how out of plumb we are.

Remember that for God to be loving and fair, His wrath must be satisfied. The Bible says, **"For the wages of sin is death."** Because Jesus paid the penalty for our sin, His wrath is satisfied and when He looks at us His mercy triumphs over His wrath. Because of our rebellious hearts, we deserve locust, fire and destruction. But because of Jesus we are God's precious people. 1 Peter 1:18,19 says, **"For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect."** When we focus on God's mercy, our perspective will be less self-centered and we will be more open to God and the needs of others as we pray.

The other reason I believe that God just didn't reveal this third and final judgment to Amos right away is that it's as if God is using these different scenarios to pull Amos into His decision-making process. God is slowly reeling Amos in, inviting him into the process of judging His people. It shows that God wants us involved in His work. Do you see how valuable that makes us to God? He doesn't need us to help Him make decisions. He is sovereign and is going to do what fulfills His purposes. And according to this passage and others in the Bible like it, it is His primary purpose, besides glorifying Himself, to have a relationship with us that

is more intimate than we could ever imagine. Imagine the God of the universe inviting you and me to join Him in the ongoing process of the working of His will for His purposes! Sure God could have gone right to door #3. But by showing Amos the first two judgments, God pulls Amos into the process by appealing to his compassion for the people.

The God of the universe is inviting you and I to join in the process of Him shaping the course of history. Ours and others. What we see here is that prayer moves God. J.A. Motyer says: "Prayer is a means by which the Lord of all brings His determined purposes to pass."

Now does that mean that God changes His mind? No. Numbers 23:19 says, ***"God is not a man, that He should lie, nor a son of man, that He should change His mind."*** In His sovereignty though, God chooses at times to be open to different ways of accomplishing His purpose. Why is that? Because He wants to draw us in to the process of what He is doing by getting us to pray more passionately and with a deeper sense of ongoing partnership in His work.

God wants us get us to a place where we are not saying, "I should pray" or "I need to pray," but, "I have the opportunity to join in a process with God in fulfilling His purposes in my life and in the life of others." That mindset should revolutionize our prayer lives.

Just think how that changes how we pray for our children, family, friends and our personal struggles. As I pray for one of my children and watch and wait for God to move in their life or

in a certain situation, I no longer see my prayers as requests that I sort of throw out to God and wait for Him to act. Those kinds of prayers get old and stale and I tend to get tired of praying them. But if I see my ongoing prayers as instruments by which God is inviting me into the actual process of Him shaping my child, that changes everything. I'm no longer seeing my prayers as being one step removed from the answer. It's not me asking God to move on behalf of someone or some situation and then stepping back to watch Him work. It's me entering in, by God's invitation, to join Him in the process of fulfilling His purposes. This is the kind of relational God we serve.

Ever wonder why some situations go on and on without much change, even though you have been praying like crazy? Maybe you are feeling like, "What's the use. I've been praying and praying and nothing seems to be happening." Maybe God is using that situation to help you understand that He wants more of you. Maybe He is using that situation to change and deepen your relationship with Him. To no longer see Him as a problem solver, but as your God that desires an intimacy with you that you never could have imagined. To journey along with Him in the process of you growing closer to Him.

I believe that when we come to see that prayer is an invitation by God to join Him in the ongoing process of fulfilling His purposes, our prayer life will deepen and become less of an "I should" thing and more of a "I can't believe I get to" thing.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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