

## “WHO CAN BUT PROPHECY”

AMOS 3:8

July 8, 1945

The choice of this text, for my first sermon as an ordained minister, was due to a suggestion by Dr. Robert Dick Wilson. Some of us were sitting in his study, reading the Aramaic of the O.T. We came upon this verse. Dr. Wilson laid aside his books and began to talk about the truth expressed in it. He spoke about the reverence for the holiness and justice of God which must be a living conviction in the hearts of those who are called to preach the gospel. Such a living conviction, controlling the whole man is possible only for those who are enabled by the Holy Spirit to receive the Bible as the revelation of God. That evening we read no more Aramaic. Dr. Wilson took the rest of the evening to talk to us about the justice of God as it is revealed in the precious Word. There were three of us in class and we were all much impressed, talking about the experience of the evening as we went home a little after eleven o'clock. And so it happened that I used this passage of God's Word to begin my ministry.

For some years on the Lord's day nearest to the ninth of July I repeated this sermon, rewriting it every time I used the text. Now it is twenty years ago since I first used this passage. I looked for a copy of an old sermon on this passage. But have not been able to find one. Now and then some people would ask me for copies of certain sermons I preached and I would give them. Perhaps I gave the only copy I had away, perhaps it got lost. As I today gratefully recall the years of service I have been permitted to give, in the greatest work God permits men to do, I turn once more to the same passage. In my ministry there have been many pleasant hours, very many blessings. I would like to tell you about the many blessings I have enjoyed, that you together with me might praise the Lord God, whose mercy never fails. But of course time would

not permit narrating that the greatest blessing which the Lord has given me during the years of my ministry is the ever increasing conviction that the Scripture is indeed the Word of God, the only infallible rule of faith and practice. That I may still believe this, with even greater conviction now, then twenty years ago, is I think a proof of God's goodness. For it was not always easy to believe that God has spoken for all time and people, concerning himself in his Word. There were many who did not believe it, even in the denomination I served. I need not tell you that I was often tempted to give up this belief in the Book. You know that. God spared me. My conflicts within my own soul deepened my conviction. Today with gratitude to God, I turn once more to the same text, to express, not in the same way, but nevertheless the same thought I expressed twenty years ago.

Amos was not a prophet, nor a prophet's son. About seven hundred years before the birth of our Lord he was tending sheep and dressing sycamore trees. He was a farmer. He lived in the little village of Tekoa about five to six miles south of Jerusalem. From the top of the hill upon which the village was situated, Amos looked down upon the bleakest and most barren spot in the Holy Land. A waste and a howling wilderness as he calls this region in his book. Here the Lord God came to him, calling him to a prophet to the people of Israel, He must go to the northern part of the land and say to these people what God had said to him. No doubt God prepared this servant for the work he was to do, but not in the organized church of that day. He was not a priest, nor a prophet, nor did he come from the school of the prophets. "I was" says Amos himself, "a herdsman and a gatherer of sycamore fruit; and the Lord took me as I followed the flock, and the Lord said unto me, 'Go, prophecy unto my people Israel.'"

When, therefore, Amos says, "The lion hath roared who can but fear, the Lord God hath spoken who can but prophecy," he is saying that he cannot do otherwise than deliver the message

he had received. He is talking about himself as a prophet, a special servant of the Lord. As a prophet he must speak of the justice of God and the coming judgment of God upon the chosen people. So then Amos is talking about prophets and prophecy. In the strict sense of the Word, no minister is a prophet, nor does he prophecy. But as Dr. Wilson pointed out, a minister of the cross, having the message in the Word, must be under the same inward constraint, compelling power, from which Amos neither would nor could deliver himself. A true minister called of God will say, "The lion hath roared, who can but fear, the Lord God hath spoken, who can but repeat it."

Now what is the first thought that leaps into the mind but this that a minister must have a deep reverence for the Lord God who hath spoken, to him and to the people of his word. Amos received that word of God in a special way when he was tending his flock and working on the trees. No doubt there had been preparation for this special way in which God revealed himself to the prophet. Amos did read the Scriptures and did think about the acts of God in the life of Abraham and Moses. Though prepared by what God had said concerning himself in days gone by, yet Amos received from the Lord a special and definite commission for the people of his own time and for us today. What God said to Amos and others like him we have in this book. Though we do not in that special way receive the revelation of God, we do have the revelation. And we can and must have the same deep reverence for the Lord God who hath spoken, to Amos as he was tending the flock, to us all in his Word.

Amos speaks of this reverence in a way which helps us greatly to understand its nature. Many a time as he looked out upon the waste and howling wilderness from the hill top where he was watching the sheep, he heard the deep roar of the lion. He knew that the lion roars when the prey is within its clutches, or so nearly so that it cannot escape. Every time he so heard the lion

roar a feeling of fear took possession of the farmer, for he well knew what that roar meant. When he heard the lion roar, a feeling of fear arose in his heart. The roar of the lion did not leave him indifferent, he did not forget it as soon as it was heard, it was not merely a sound. Just so when he heard God speak it did have an effect upon his whole being. As the roar of the lion filled him with fear so did the Lord speaking to him fill his whole heart with reverence. When the lion roared he could not keep that fear out of his heart, when the Lord spoke to him he could not and would not keep the reverence for God out of his heart. This reverence for God who speaks to his people is an irresistible effect of God himself speaking.

We would most seriously misunderstand the prophet if we would now suppose that this reverence for God is something like the fear for the wild beast who kills to satisfy his own hunger. It is very clear that Amos means by this reverence a deep tender love for God and for the people whom God has chosen. This is clear in the chapter from which the text is taken. Amos speaking for God says, "You only have I known of all the families of the earth." Here is the truth that God chose this people because he loved them. He did not play with them as an Almighty tyrant, getting satisfaction out of their folly. He loved them with an everlasting love. Such a conception of God as Amos clearly had would make his reverence for God charged through and through with love. It was only because he loved God and God's people that he was afraid of saying or doing anything which might hurt those people and be displeasing to his sender. What fear there was in his heart was due to the real love which took complete possession of him.

This reverence then is pure piety. It is worship of God. It is honoring God, it is glorifying him. There can be no deeper piety than to believe that God means what he says, and will do as he promised. To repeat what God had said is to honor him. To take one's stand upon the

infallibility of the Scriptures is an eminently religious act; it honors the supremacy of God in the sphere of truth.” This reverence is born of faith that God who has spoken is the author of truth. It is the prayer, speak to me Lord that I may speak in living echoes of thy word.” It is the fear to say anything which God has not said, lest the most precious possession of the soul, love for the living God and his own people, is lost. The lion hath roared who can but fear, the Lord God hath spoken who can but prophecy.

Today as I look back upon twenty years of my ministry, I can do so with gratitude in my heart. I am glad. God’s mercy endureth forever. For this reverence for the word of God has ever been deep in my heart. I do not mean of course that I have always infallibly said, “what God has infallibly revealed. I do not mean that I ever spoke in living echoes of his own Word. Nor do I mean that this reverence always provided for me an easy and a smooth path to walk on. There were rough places on my pathway so far. Sometimes the people misunderstood me, thinking that I was a stiffnecked and very narrow minded minister. There were times when the people in their judgment were right, when I defended a position which was not in accordance with God’s Word. And yet I do sincerely think, and I believe I am not in error when I say that reverence for the Word of God, love for my Maker, and hope for his approval has been the undercurrent of these twenty years. I do think I am right when I say that my main motive has always been to honor God by repeating what he himself has said in his own Book. Deviations there have been, sometimes serious, I was lead into temptation, I did not always overcome. But it pleased God to bring me back again. I can repeat with full heart and complete conviction the word of the ancient prophet, “The lion hath roared, who can but fear, the Lord God hath spoken who can but prophecy.” For God’s word I have a deep reverence.

The second thought which likewise leaps into the mind from this text itself is that the minister is constrained to take the message of that Word. Having such a reverence for the Word, Amos could not do otherwise than say what God had said to him. He did not go with his own message which in the agony of his soul seeking the truth, he had evolved from his own mind as in the stillness of the night he watched the sheep asleep. He did not get his message from the people as he listened to them talking in the market place. Amos received his message directly from God himself. This prophet would have understood the Apostle Paul who many years later said, "Woe is me if I preach not the gospel." The minister of Christ, if indeed he has a deep reverence for the Word, will receive his message from the Book. He does not derive his message from his own more or less well trained mind, nor from spirits of the other world which he thinks now and then touch his mind, but only from the Book.

That Amos did indeed receive his message from his Sender lies on the face of that message, and those who will may read it. For Amos speaks of the justice of God. His theme is the righteousness of the Lord. As a plumb line which hangs perfectly straight from the walls, so perfect is also the justice of God. As John said many years later, "God is light and in him is no darkness, this is the message we have heard, this is the message we declare unto you." Now Amos speaks in the name of and for God Himself when he says, ""You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore will I punish you for all your iniquities." It is a bad thing when in Sodom and Gomorrah men seek to do with men that which is unseemingly but the same thing is an abomination in Jerusalem where the holy God has made himself known. Adultery is a sinful thing among the people of the world who may not even know that the Lord Jesus said about it. It is an awful thing among those who know the teaching of the Lord. To whom much has been given from him much will be required. I cannot take time now to call your attention to

other elements of message of Amos, which reveals on its face the divine origin. This will suffice. No one can talk with such conviction and such purity about the justice of God who has not received his message from above.

The minister message must have written on its face its holy heavenly origin. This does not mean that all people who hear that message will read from whence it comes. People are not good judges. Are there not many who do not even read on the pages of the bible itself that it comes from above? But it does mean that the minister will with care always attempt to get his message from the Book. He will read and reread that book, spending most of his hours in his study until his every thought is lead captive to Christ. His message will be on the text which he seeks to bind upon the hearts of his people. To bring the people to the bible and the Bible to the people, himself being only a voice crying in the wilderness is the highest privilege of the minister. This is most particularly, most specifically his God given task. It is not an easy task. The minister is his own greatest enemy. Easily he begins to preach the loved little children born of his own mind, which appear to him altogether beautiful. Next to himself, the people also may become an enemy of the minister, though they seldom intended to be such. They may desire to hear about the little children of their own minds whom naturally they also love. The minister must have courage to test every thought, most especially his own, by the only infallible rule of faith and practice which is the Word. For it is only thus that each message can have on its face the divine origin without which it is useless, even worse sinful.

In view of this anniversary service, I may be permitted a few personal reflections. I know and you know that not every sermon which I have preach had on its face its divine origin. I have not always been able to forget myself in the pulpit of Christ. By and by all my work shall be tested by fire, of which final test I shall speak this evening. In that day of Christ's appearing

there may be much more of my work which is but hay and stubble than I am now aware of. What I thought was really worthwhile may prove to have been less so in the perfect judgment of my Sender. What I thought was a failure may have been the power of God unto salvation for many. It shall all be revealed in the last day.

I am sure that my prevailing desire has been to bring only God's Word to the people. I recall the days when there was a milk strike and the farmers were dumping their milk along the highway. I remember that I offended many of these good farmers by telling them that it was a sin to dump their milk. Are we not stewards of everything that God has given us? But I remember more vividly the evening when I walked down highway forty two struggling with my desire not to say anything about this sin, which was so common lest I offend some of my best friends. And I remember the victory which God gave me over self. It may seem unimportant to you, it may seem a little foolish even, but it was at the time very important to me, and is it not in what often seems to be but little things that we are most often severely tempted. There are other hours I recall when I was tempted to trim my message to the spirit of the age, but I shall not trouble you with them now. These are all signs to me that no matter how often I failed, I tried to be and prayed that I might be faithful to the whole word of God. That each message might carry on its face the stamp of its divine origin.

This morning I remember the thrill of joy which went through my whole soul, when a man in the Broadway Avenue church said to me, "You have power to set the message of the bible clearly before us." I thanked him but could not tell him what spiritual joy was mine in the brief moment. I know too that such personal subjective reactions are not always trustworthy and I also know that the judgment of an individual is not always correct. But is it not also true that this joy could not have been mine in that hour if the deepest desire of my heart was not to bring only

the truth as it is the precious word. I think so. And so as I look back upon these twenty years of my ministry, I give thanks to God for the conscious endeavor placed in my heart by Him only, to say only that which God has himself said in his book. I have nothing to boast of, excepting only that which God has given me, both the message and the desire to proclaim it in purity.

Finally my brethren, another thought leaps from the text into our hearts which I also expressed twenty years ago, and with which I now close this message. The lion hath roared who can but fear, the Lord God hath spoken who can but prophecy. Since it is God who has spoken the message is timeless and eternal, even like God himself, the message does not change. When Amos had delivered his message he went back to the hills from which he looked down upon the waste howling wilderness that surrounded them. There he wrote what he had said in outline, not every word he had spoken, but the outline of his sermons only. I do not know whether Amos was conscious of the fact that this was a message for all time and all people everywhere. Did he know that his message was part of the bible itself, that his little book would be placed between the same covers that held the great message of Moses? No one can answer that question. But we may be very sure that Amos was most keenly aware of the timelessness of his message. It could not very well be otherwise. Did he not receive it from God? He knew that what he had said would be true through all the endless ages, among all people everywhere for all time. There is a blessedness in that consciousness which passes the power of expression.

The minister of Christ, if he has reverence for the word and therefore takes his message from the word may and does have that blessedness. The sermons may not be works of art, a master in the use of language the minister may not be, a profound thinker he may not be. It is so worthwhile that the message of God shall be dressed in language that is beautiful and in thought that comes from the deep places of the human soul. If the minister has this power of expression

and can think even very deeply he is the more blessed. But without these things he may, though the humbles of all God's servant have within his own heart the assurance that his message is timeless, eternal as He from whom it comes. Moses was thinking about himself and about the change and decay that is seen in all things here on earth when he prayed, "establish thou the work of our hands, the work of our hands establish thou it." As the minister thinks of himself and his very poor efforts he often repeats that prayer. But when he thinks of the reverence which constrained him to take the message from the Word, and about the message itself taken from the Word, he knows that his work is established through the eternal ages and that the day of Christ will reveal it.

Because I was conscious somewhat of the timelessness of the message I was thankful when in 1925 I might begin the work of the gospel ministry. How well I recall the day when I was ordained, it seemed to me then that I had reached the point for which I had been striving the past several years when I could raise my hands over the people of God and pronounce the benediction upon them. And much of the day I repeated that benediction silently in my heart. And when I preached this first sermon and came to this point, the timelessness of the message, I felt it deeply in my soul. Nevertheless as I now look back upon that day I am aware of other hopes and aspirations in my soul. As a young man who starts to farm and dreams of getting rich quick so also did I dream of many things which are temporal. I am older now. Older by twenty years. And I suppose because I am older I do not know whether this is the general experience of men, I am beginning to think about the day of my departure, when I shall be at home with the Lord. Today the timelessness of the message means much more to me. In it I seem to have a taste of the timeless eternity to which I am going. Their works do follow them. Whatever has been according to the word of God during these twenty years cannot perish. And whatever has not

been according to the Word of God shall perish and thanks be unto the Lord Jesus who gives also that promise.