

Explore: Can I get a witness?

January 25, 2013

- This **Explore the Bible** lesson for **Feb. 3** focuses on Amos 7:4-17.

Witnessing. It is one of those words that elicits a wide range of emotions—from fear to inadequacy—in the hearts of many believers. Some simply avoid these feelings by limiting the duty to witness to those who are called specially by God. While most know God desires and calls for all believers to share our faith, many are frozen by fear of rejection or feeling they do not know enough Bible.

Often, these feelings arise from a misunderstanding about what witnessing means. As in the secular world, a witness is someone who is able to convey a story or report about something he or she saw or experienced. Few of us hesitate to relate stories of things that happen during our work or leisure time or to share news of a new favorite restaurant or movie. Yet when it comes to the greatest news we have, we hesitate or withhold altogether.

The Old Testament prophets stand as our example of how we might witness for God. These men and women, most of whom were ordinary people prior to receiving God's word, not only were called to share good news, but also God's word of judgment. While this certainly added to their fear, they witnessed for God in a variety of ways. As we look at the life of Amos (as well as the other prophets), we find witnessing is not limited to one activity.

Interceding for sinners (Amos 7:4-6)

These verses report on the second of five visions God gave to Amos concerning the judgment to come upon the people. Even though he knew the people were guilty, the prophet's immediate response was to pray on their behalf that God might change his mind and withhold the punishment. Many of the people of faith in the Old Testament witnessed to God's love

for people by modeling that love through praying for them. Abraham prayed for the people of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18:22-33). Moses prayed for the Israelites, even before he knew what sin they had committed (Exodus 32:7-14). Solomon included intercession in his prayer of dedication of the temple (1 Kings 8:33-34). The prophets understood intercession to be part of their calling (Isaiah 64:6-9, Daniel 9:4-20, Jeremiah 7:16).

In a world where so many have explained away God and feel alone in their difficulties and struggles, sometimes an effective witness is simply to assure them we are praying for them.

Affirming the truth (Amos 7:7-9)

In these verses, God gives Amos the clear message that there is a set standard against which God measures human behavior. God is the one who holds the plumb line that determines the degree to which a person's actions align with that standard.

Many people today deny the reality of any absolute standard against which all behavior is measured. They maintain each individual holds his or her own plumb line. For them, what is true and acceptable for one may not necessarily be true and acceptable for another, and each set of moral guidelines is valid and cannot be imposed on the other.

Such moral relativism invalidates any laws that outline "right" and "wrong," and has contributed to the rise in violence and decline of personal responsibility. Yet God has built a moral standard into his creation to guide humanity as we live with and relate to one another and exercise dominion over the earth. It is a standard that does not change in relation to historical or cultural settings. It is the standard God not only expects his followers to live by, but also calls them to bear witness to.

Standing against opposition (Amos 7:10-13)

Occasionally, the fear some feel concerning witnessing is justified, since there are those who will seek to silence or discredit someone's witness. Amos, along with all of the other true prophets in the Old Testament, often faced direct physical opposition from those who did not want to hear what he had to say. These often were the religious leaders who did not want to hear that their actions were bringing God's judgment. Rather than merely ignoring the prophets, they sought to force them to be quiet.

Today, there still are many places in our world where bearing witness to God's truth leads to physical persecution or death. While that threat is not a part of our experience in the United States, we still have an enemy who constantly is seeking to discredit through a variety of ways anyone who would speak God's message. Just as we are called to be ready at all times to give reason for the hope within us (1 Peter 3:15), we also should be ready to stand and give a defense of the truth in the face of any opposition.

Obeying God's call (Amos 7:14-17)

All those who would call themselves followers of Christ are given a mission to share the gospel with the world. This is not reserved for a select few specially called individuals. This call does not require any special knowledge or training. As he states, Amos' background included nothing that would have identified him as a messenger of God. He was a wealthy land owner and sheep rancher. He had no theological training and did not even have access to a Bible. But like all the other true prophets in the Bible, when God called him to deliver God's message, he simply obeyed. It often truthfully is said that God cares little about your perceived ability. When God calls, he only is interested in your availability. Jesus' last words to us before he ascended to the Father were "you will receive power and you will be my witnesses" (Acts 1:8). We have the story and we have the power. The only question is will we obey God's call.