

April 23, 2017

The Famine has Arrived!

Behold, the days come, saith the Lord God, that I will send a famine in the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord. And they shall wander from sea to sea, and from the north even to the east, they shall run to and fro to seek the word of the Lord, and shall not find it. In that day shall the fair virgins and young men faint for thirst. (Amos 8:11-13).

This strong verse eleven presents two basic pictures: A famine of bread, and a famine of hearing the Lord's words – both sent by God. As one is compared against the other, a fair analysis suggests we look at both.

A famine of bread:

(Scripture)

Scripture gives us examples of physical famine, that is to say, actual famine of food stuffs. This type of famine is one of God's judging arrows he keeps in his quiver and sends out when he pleases. This is one of God's sore judgments which he sometimes orders to come upon a people for their grievous sins. A bread famine is very dreadful.

There are at least 13 incidents of such famines in the Bible.

In Canaan in Abraham's day ["grievous" famine] (Gen. 12:10)

In Canaan in Isaac's day (Gen. 26:1)

"Over all the face of the earth" in Joseph's day (Gen. 41:54-57)

Across "the land" in "the days when the judges ruled" (Ruth 1:1)

In Canaan in David's day (2 Sam. 21:1)

In Canaan in Elijah's day; Ahab blames Elijah (1 Ki. 17:1; 18:17)

"Dearth in the land" in Elisha's day (2 Ki. 4:38)

"[G]reat famine in Samaria" in Elisha's day (2 Ki. 6:25)

In Canaan for "seven years" in Elisha's day (2 Ki. 8:1)

In "besieged" Jerusalem in Zedekiah's day (2 Ki. 25:2,3)

In Canaan in Nehemiah's day (Neh. 5:3)

In an unknown land (Lk. 15:14)

In the Roman Empire "throughout all the world" in Paul's day (Acts 11:28)

Looking at the context of a few of these instances, we see famine often placed the Lord's children in extreme circumstances. For example, the "famine in the land" discussed beginning at Genesis 12:10 caused Abraham to journey into Egypt and it was on that trip that he convinced Sarah to tell the inquiring Egyptians that she was his sister. Abraham was fearful they would kill him to get his wife. Similarly, Elijah's exciting interactions with Ahab (including his habitation with the widow at Zarephath) resulted from the famine's conditions. (1 Kings 17).

The dearth described in 2 Kings displays the desperation that often results: **And there was a great famine in Samaria: and, behold, they besieged it, until an ass's head was sold for fourscore pieces of silver, and the fourth part of a cab of dove's dung for five pieces of silver.** (2 Kings 6:25).

The 14th chapter of Jeremiah paints a powerful picture of famine in what most commentators believe was all of Judea, either during the reign of Zedekiah or Jehoiakam. Keep in mind as we review these Holy Spirit-inspired words the allegorical usage of "famine" in our text in relation to a hearing of the Lord's word.

14 The word of the LORD that came to Jeremiah concerning the dearth.

² Judah mourneth, and the gates thereof languish; they are black unto the ground; and the cry of Jerusalem is gone up.

³ And their nobles have sent their little ones to the waters: they came to the pits, and found no water; they returned with their vessels empty; they were ashamed and confounded, and covered their heads.

⁴ Because the ground is chapt, for there was no rain in the earth, the plowmen were ashamed, they covered their heads.

⁵ Yea, the hind also calved in the field, and forsook it, because there was no grass.

⁶ And the wild asses did stand in the high places, they snuffed up the wind like dragons; their eyes did fail, because there was no grass.

⁷ O LORD, though our iniquities testify against us, do thou it for thy name's sake: for our backslidings are many; we have sinned against thee.

⁸ O the hope of Israel, the saviour thereof in time of trouble, why shouldest thou be as a stranger in the land, and as a wayfaring man that turneth aside to tarry for a night?

⁹ Why shouldest thou be as a man astonied, as a mighty man that cannot save? yet thou, O LORD, art in the midst of us, and we are called by thy name; leave us not.

¹⁰ Thus saith the LORD unto this people, Thus have they loved to wander, they have not refrained their feet, therefore the LORD doth not accept them; he will now remember their iniquity, and visit their sins.

¹¹ Then said the LORD unto me, Pray not for this people for their good.

¹² When they fast, I will not hear their cry; and when they offer burnt offering and an oblation, I will not accept them: but I will consume them by the sword, and by the famine, and by the pestilence.

¹³ Then said I, Ah, Lord GOD! behold, the prophets say unto them, Ye shall not see the sword, neither shall ye have famine; but I will give you assured peace in this place.

14 Then the LORD said unto me, The prophets prophesy lies in my name: I sent them not, neither have I commanded them, neither spake unto them: they prophesy unto you a false vision and divination, and a thing of nought, and the deceit of their heart.

15 Therefore thus saith the LORD concerning the prophets that prophesy in my name, and I sent them not, yet they say, Sword and famine shall not be in this land; By sword and famine shall those prophets be consumed.

16 And the people to whom they prophesy shall be cast out in the streets of Jerusalem because of the famine and the sword; and they shall have none to bury them, them, their wives, nor their sons, nor their daughters: for I will pour their wickedness upon them.

17 Therefore thou shalt say this word unto them; Let mine eyes run down with tears night and day, and let them not cease: for the virgin daughter of my people is broken with a great breach, with a very grievous blow.

18 If I go forth into the field, then behold the slain with the sword! and if I enter into the city, then behold them that are sick with famine! yea, both the prophet and the priest go about into a land that they know not.

19 Hast thou utterly rejected Judah? hath thy soul lothed Zion? why hast thou smitten us, and there is no healing for us? we looked for peace, and there is no good; and for the time of healing, and behold trouble!

20 We acknowledge, O LORD, our wickedness, and the iniquity of our fathers: for we have sinned against thee.

21 Do not abhor us, for thy name's sake, do not disgrace the throne of thy glory: remember, break not thy covenant with us.

22 Are there any among the vanities of the Gentiles that can cause rain? or can the heavens give showers? art not thou he, O LORD our God? therefore we will wait upon thee: for thou hast made all these things.

And let us consider one final example of famines set forth in scripture, specifically the famine mentioned in Luke Chapter 15's parable of the prodigal son, where we see a mixture of the physical and spiritual application. The text tells us:

¹¹ And he said, A certain man had two sons:

¹² And the younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me. And he divided unto them his living.

¹³ And not many days after the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living.

¹⁴ And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want.

¹⁵ And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine.

¹⁶ And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him.

¹⁷ And when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger!

¹⁸ I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee,

¹⁹ And am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants.

²⁰ And he arose, and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him.

²¹ And the son said unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son.

22 But the father said to his servants, Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet:

23 And bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it; and let us eat, and be merry:

24 For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry.

25 Now his elder son was in the field: and as he came and drew nigh to the house, he heard musick and dancing.

26 And he called one of the servants, and asked what these things meant.

27 And he said unto him, Thy brother is come; and thy father hath killed the fatted calf, because he hath received him safe and sound.

28 And he was angry, and would not go in: therefore came his father out, and intreated him.

29 And he answering said to his father, Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment: and yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends:

30 But as soon as this thy son was come, which hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf.

31 And he said unto him, Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine.

32 It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found.

Dr. Gill provides the best discussion of the famine portion of this parable:

[T]here arose a mighty famine in that land; sin brings men into a starving and famishing condition; for in the far country, the land of sin, there is a famine of the word: though the Gospel is preached, it is only food to spiritual persons; unregenerate men have no desire to it, but neglect and despise it; and if they attend

it, it has no place in them: they that are in this land, are aliens from the ordinances of God, the breasts of consolation, the goodness and fatness of his house; they are in a pit, wherein is no water; their taste is vitiated to every thing that is spiritually good; they live on bread of deceit, and labour after that which satisfies not; wherefore they look like skeletons, and are as the dry bones in Ezekiel's vision.

(Literature)

In addition, literature can provide us light on physical famines. For example, Lizzie Collingham's *The Taste of War – World War II and the Battle for Food* deals with food and its importance in the context of World War II (WWII). The thesis of the book is that WWII was started and went on as long as it did because of the various nations' need for a secure food supply, both short and long-term. Many historians believe Germany surrendered at the end of World War I because her population was starving. Germany, under Hitler, had a pervasive fear of a return to that condition. Similar situations abounded in other countries as well.

Excerpts from Collingham's book helps better understand famine and its impacts on the human body and mind. While considering these remarks, again I encourage you to envision these descriptions in a spiritual sense when there is a famine of the hearing the words of the Lord:

During the Second World War at least 20 million people died . . . a terrible death from starvation, malnutrition and its associated diseases: a number to equal the 19.5 military deaths. (p. 1)

The Leningrader Annalvanovna Likhacheva, who 'survived all the stages of emaciation', recalled that 'it began simply with wasting, shortness of breath, slowed thought . . . And then everything went downhill. The darkness, the deadly cold, the hunger, the lack of strength.' Others were afflicted by a painfully acute over-excitement. The water content of the body reduces at a slower rate than the wasting of the muscles and tissues and the flaccidity of the body increases. Some victims of starvation develop hunger oedema and swell up with excess water. The swelling begins in the abdomen and legs and spreads throughout the body. The skin becomes stretched, shiny and hypersensitive. Blood pressure drops and the victim is plagued by keratitis (redness and soreness of the cornea), sore gums, headaches, pains in the legs, neuralgic pains, tremors and ataxis (a loss of control over the muscles, primarily in the limbs). These symptoms are accompanied by an intense craving for carbohydrates and salt, and uncontrollable diarrhea. Just before death the victim veers wildly from depression to intense irritation and then a profound torpor (apathy). (p. 6)

*It had always been the intention of Hitler and a section of the National Socialist leadership to eradicate the Jews from Europe. The food crisis of 1941-42 provided an ostensibly rational reason as to why the crime of murder should be committed. The Jews could not be allowed to continue eating the precious food which the German workers deserved: they must die in order to free up desperately needed food supplies. The food worries gave added impetus to the Holocaust. * **

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Given that (the Jews) were 'extremely damaging eaters' they needed to be removed as quickly as possible. (p. 205)

*The Tonkin peasantry began to starve. Thousands abandoned their homes and wandered about looking for food. 'They roam in long endless groups, comprising the whole family, the elderly, the children, men, women, all of whom are disfigured by poverty, skinny, shaky, almost naked, including young girls of adolescent age who should have been very shy. From time to time they stop to close the eyes of one of them who has collapsed and who would never be able to rise again or to take the piece of rag . . . , that has covered the fallen victim. Looking at these human shadows who are uglier than the ugliest animals, seeing the shrunk corpses, with only a few straws covering them for both clothes and funeral cloth, at the side of the roads one could feel that human life was so shameful. * * **

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*It has been estimated that between 1 and 2 million Vietnamese died. * * **
For many villages in north Vietnam, the famine rather than the Vietnam war was the worst experience of the twentieth century. (p. 241)

When the American journalist Theodore White visited the province in February 1943 he saw corpses by the sides of the road. The desperate ate leaves, peanut husks, 'the green slime' from pools of water and even each other. 'A doctor told us of a woman caught boiling her baby; she was not molested, because she insisted that the child had died before she started to cook it.' (p. 256)

(T)he starving Japanese resorted to eating any living thing: 'pigs, dogs, possum, mice, bats, kangaroos, snakes, lizards, frogs, leeches, earthworms, centipedes, all sorts of insects (butterflies, caterpillars), maggots (in some cases they even took maggots from the latrines), crocodiles, fish, lobsters, crabs, shells, birds'. They dug up any edible vegetable matter, collected wild grasses and ate water lilies and duck weed. (p. 298)

Soviet soldiers would often stave off scurvy by making a foul brew of boiled pine needles, rich in vitamin C. Vera Vladimirovna Milutina, a survivor of the Leningrad siege, recalled trucks driving through the streets of besieged Leningrad carrying soldiers who had been out in the countryside collecting pine and spruce branches. 'They were extracting vitamins from the pine needles, and this infusion, I had heard, worked miracles on the starving wounded in the hospitals.' The soldiers once tossed her a heap of branches and she gnawed on them all the way home. (p.

323)

A famine of hearing the words of the Lord:

But bad as physical famines are, something worse is threatened and promised by our text, specifically, a **famine of hearing the words of the Lord**. Note this unique language. It does not say there is a famine of the words of the Lord. Indeed, the words of the Lord are everywhere. Bibles are available aplenty. Preacher-types are constantly quoting various segments of scripture. And so on. What the text describes is a **famine of hearing the words of the Lord**. The emphasis there seems to be on "hearing."

Nor are we to necessarily suppose this prophecy applies to a single historical time or event. The verse says **the days come** when the Lord will send this calamity. The days indeed came in ancient Israel. Nor does the text limit the geography of such a spiritual famine. But strong evidence suggests the famine here prophesied has arrived, now, today, and is world-wide.

The Bible passage that immediately comes to mind here is from Romans Chapter 10, including:

¹⁴ How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher?

And how shall they preach, except they be sent? * * *

So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word (decree) of

God. (Romans 10:14, 15 and 17).

The message here is that there are few (a *de minimis*, small or negligible number) God-inspired and God-sent preachers in the days of famine here discussed. By the "word" (or decree) of God, virtually no preachers are sent, and thus there is no "hearing." So (and back to our Amos text), the result is a famine of HEARING the words (or the truths and commandments) of God.

And in an effort to grasp the impact of this latter day "hearing the words" famine, please liken the consequences of physical famine discussed above to spiritual results from not hearing the words of the Lord. E.g.

- spiritual death (death, death, death, and lots of it!) [so we read this exclamation during the famine discussed in 2 Kings 4 **there is death in the pot**, see 2 Kings 4:40];

- spiritual sickness (weakness, blindness, etc.);
- feeding **on ashes** or anything else they can get their hands on (Isaiah 44:20) ["maggots from the latrines" tops the list];
- dead bodies lying in the streets;
- slow, lingering death of the spiritual body politic;
- charred landscapes;
- violence;
- no natural affection or respect (boiling their babies);
- ugliness and disfigurement; and,
- prayers not answered.

Note when famine in nature strikes in one part of the world it has a domino-like impact on other parts; thus we have world-wide spiritual darkness and dearth.

But even in the dark days described by Amos, there will be a few who hear the irresistible words of the Lord and eat of the bread of life. Instead of famine and starvation, those fortunate, peculiar people will feast on the **bread of life** which **cometh down from heaven, that a man may eat thereof, and not die** but **shall live forever**. (John 6:48, 50, 51). These highly-favored, selected human beings are drawn to Christ by God the Father (John 6:44) and hear this admonition from their Lord: **Labor not for the meat which perisheth, but for that meat which endureth unto everlasting life, which the Son of man shall give unto you: for him hath God the**

Father sealed. (John 6:27). There is food that endures forever and leads to everlasting life, and no famine can, or will, impact it. Consider Barnes' comments on John 6:27:

The meat that perisheth - The food for the supply of your natural needs. It perishes. The strength you derive from it is soon exhausted, and your wasted powers need to be reinvigorated.

That meat which endureth - The supply of your spiritual wants; that which supports, and nourishes, and strengthens the soul; the doctrines of the gospel, that are to a weak and guilty soul what needful food is to the weary and decaying body.

To everlasting life - The strength derived from the doctrines of the gospel is not exhausted. It endures without wasting away. It nourishes the soul to everlasting life. "They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall run and not be weary, and shall walk and not faint," [Isaiah 40:31](#).

Back to our opening text, we can rest assured there will be no famine for the Lord's people when it comes to this **meat which endureth unto everlasting life.** (John 6:27). To the contrary, they can, will and do anticipate a great feast and banqueting table. **He brought me to the banqueting house, and his banner over me was love.** (Song 2:4). No dearth there; no scarcity of food, no hunger and no starvation.

Permit me to revert momentarily back to Collingham's book for this pertinent anecdote. Keeping in mind that most soldiers were terribly underfed during WWII:

In December 1940 R. B. Buckle, a nineteen-year-old British brewery worker from Norfolk, found himself living at the American navy receiving station in Seattle,

waiting to board the battleship *Warspite*. He was amazed by the food: 'We sat down in a huge dining hall and were waited on by coloured sailors who wore dazzling white uniforms . . . The meal was excellent. Steak, mark you! Real steak with onions, creamed and French fried potatoes, green beans and a delicious sauce. Sweet was apple crumble and cream. A huge mug of coffee completed the meal.'
(*The Taste of War*, p. 435).

And as to those who will partake of this abundant meal, we need look no farther than the Parable of the Great Banquet in Luke Chapter 14:

¹² Then said he also to him that bade him, When thou makest a dinner or a supper, call not thy friends, nor thy brethren, neither thy kinsmen, nor thy rich neighbours; lest they also bid thee again, and a recompence be made thee.

¹³ But when thou makest a feast, call the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind:

¹⁴ And thou shalt be blessed; for they cannot recompense thee: for thou shalt be recompensed at the resurrection of the just.

¹⁵ And when one of them that sat at meat with him heard these things, he said unto him, Blessed is he that shall eat bread in the kingdom of God.

¹⁶ Then said he unto him, A certain man made a great supper, and bade many:

¹⁷ And sent his servant at supper time to say to them that were bidden, Come; for all things are now ready.

18 And they all with one consent began to make excuse. The first said unto him, I have bought a piece of ground, and I must needs go and see it: I pray thee have me excused.

19 And another said, I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to prove them: I pray thee have me excused.

20 And another said, I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come.

21 So that servant came, and shewed his lord these things. Then the master of the house being angry said to his servant, Go out quickly into the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in hither the poor, and the maimed, and the halt, and the blind.

22 And the servant said, Lord, it is done as thou hast commanded, and yet there is room.

23 And the lord said unto the servant, Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled.

24 For I say unto you, That none of those men which were bidden shall taste of my supper.

I would be derelict were I not to end a sermon on this topic without bringing to your remembrance that wonderful Watts hymn *How Sweet and Awful is the Place*, primarily the first four verses:

How sweet and awful is the place
With Christ within the doors

While everlasting love displays
The choicest of her stores.

While all our hearts and all our songs
Join to admire the feast
Each of us cry with thankful tongues,
"Lord, why was I a guest?"

"Why was I made to hear thy voice
and enter while there's room,
When thousands make a wretched choice
And rather starve than come?"

'Twas the same love that spread the feast
that sweetly drew us in;
Else we had still refused to taste
and perished in our sin.