

Famine (Part 1): The Beginning of Sorrows

Famine in Retrospect

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Twenty-three children in the world die from hunger every minute of every day! That calculates to more than 33,000 every day. It is very sobering to realize how many children are dying just as we sit here.

Today, especially in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, we are hearing of and experiencing shortages of food, drinking water, gasoline, and diesel fuel. The shortage of diesel fuel and gasoline affects shipping of necessary goods for daily life, including school-bus fuel. There are shortages of jet fuel, heating oil and natural gas, electricity, and housing, as well as building materials such as cement, wood, steel, and insulation. These all seem to be in short supply for various reasons. We have an awkward situation in which China is buying up much of the material. We have weather that causes shortages, too. This afternoon, let us try to put these shortages in a true perspective. We are going to look at famine in retrospect.

Another term for shortage, in the broadest sense, is *famine*. Famine is most commonly understood, in a physical sense, to refer to the lack of a supply of food or water. This word occurs often in the Bible, in both literal and figurative senses, but most biblical references to famine are to literal famine, or what we might call "physical famine."

The common Old Testament words for famine all mean "hunger." This can include individuals or whole nations. In the New Testament, the word *limos* means primarily "failure," or "want of food." Biblically recorded famines were often long and very severe, accompanied by wars and followed by pestilence. During the time of famine people fed on wild herbs, donkey's flesh, dung, human flesh, and waste. Nothing good can be said of famine, except the good that God is able to bring out of it.

In addition to the strictly moral reasons, various causes of a merely natural and economic kind contribute to famine. Among these causes is ignorance in the knowledge of agriculture, which dominates the cause of famine, and this results in few resources to stimulate growing produce or raising cattle and flocks. Sometimes people would choose unfavorable seasons and locations, making it impossible for them to use the productive powers of rain and sunshine to produce fruit and vegetables. Sometimes people just chose the wrong place to farm, such as in a desert or very cold region.

Another cause was insufficient means of transit, often rendering it impossible to supply the needs of other dependent regions of a nation. Even an abundance of food and water in one region gave no guarantee that another region could be supplied, until recently in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. We have seen this in action with the victims of the Hurricane Katrina. Trucks were very rapidly deployed—not fast enough for many people, but relatively quickly—to supply food, water, and clothing.

Since the line between famine and plenty in Palestine depended mainly on the rain coming at the right time, famine was an ever-present threat for those people. Thus, in the biblical accounts, we see many cases in which God's people had to survive famine. A prime biblical example is that of ancient Egypt. The scriptures record several famines in Palestine and the neighboring countries. The first is described as so grievous as to compel Abraham to leave Canaan to go to Egypt.

Genesis 12:10 Now there was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to dwell there, for the famine was severe in the land.

We know that Abraham was faithful and a man of God, yet he still had to go through shortages. Immediately after entering the land that was promised as his inheritance, Abraham's faith was tried by the famine that came upon them. Although he went down to Egypt for food, it was only "to sojourn," not to live there permanently; his faith in God's promise remained unshaken. Because Abraham realized that he had a part to play in his salvation, so to speak, in a physical way, he went to someplace where he could get food. However, his approach was that it was temporary.

In some areas of the world, flooding actually supplies rich soil for crops. If the rivers do not flood, a famine may hit the following year. Egypt is very fertile with a fertility that gained it the right to be compared with the "garden of the Lord." That is quite a statement to make about an area.

Genesis 13:10 And Lot lifted his eyes and saw all the plain of Jordan, that it was well watered everywhere (before the LORD destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah) like the garden of the LORD, like the land of Egypt as you go toward Zoar.

The mighty river of Egypt, the Nile, annually rises and inundates nearly the whole area. Because of the rich deposits of fertile silt, it to be easily cultivated, but this same bounty of nature has often exposed the country to the opposite extreme of drought. The scarcity of rain that Egypt gets is primarily on the Mediterranean coast. Since wells are supplied only by filtration from the river through a nitrous soil, a failure in the rise of the Nile usually results in a scarcity of water for the whole nation. However, if it is followed by cool weather, and if it is only for one year, the hard work of the Egyptian people could prevent a serious famine. It takes very hard work to transport the water from other areas.

Thus, most of the causes of famines in Egypt can be credited to poor or non-existent flooding, accompanied by dry easterly and southerly winds. Both of these winds dry up the earth, and the southerly winds keep back the rain-clouds from the north. It is these dry winds that are the primary cause of the shortage in flooding, because they slow down the flow and somewhat dry up the water that comes from the tropical rains that fall upon the Abyssinian mountains.

Interestingly, there is scarcely a land on the earth in which famine has raged so often and so terribly as in Egypt. The swelling of the Nile, either a few feet above or below what is

necessary, becomes destructive. It can either cause too much flooding, or it can cause a drought by not getting enough water to the fertile lands in which they grow the crops.

In the way of a familiar example of the effect a flooding river can have, think back to the early 1990s. I remember flying over the area where the Mississippi had flooded around St. Louis; and as far as the eye could see the water just went, it seemed, over the horizon. That looked like a major disaster; and it was, for the people who lived there. Their homes were flooded and they had to move. It was a tremendous amount of work to stop the flow of the Mississippi River into the outlying areas.

In the years following that, the farmers had bumper crops. They were producing larger fruits and vegetables and more of them than they had ever seen before, because that river had dropped so much valuable silt on the land. It actually became a blessing. Where the curse came, so to speak, is that people built their homes in an area where they really should not have, because it is the history of the Mississippi to flood at times.

Another famine occurred in the days of Isaac, which was the cause of his removal from Canaan to Gerar. This is the incident between Isaac and Abimelech.

Genesis 26:1-2 There was a famine in the land, besides the first famine that was in the days of Abraham. And Isaac went to Abimelech king of the Philistines, in Gerar. Then the LORD appeared to him and said: "Do not go down to Egypt; live in the land of which I shall tell you."

The most remarkable famine and drought in Egypt lasted for seven years, while Joseph was governor. It was distinguished for its duration, extent, and severity, especially since Egypt is one of the countries least subject to such a calamity, by reason of its general fertility. The ordinary cause of famine in Egypt, as I just explained, is connected with the annual overflow of the Nile. However, it appears that more than local causes were in operation in the case noted in Genesis 41.

Genesis 41:29-31 "Indeed seven years of great plenty will come throughout all the land of Egypt; but after them seven years of famine will arise, and all the plenty will be forgotten in the land of Egypt; and the famine will deplete the land. So the plenty will not be known in the land because of the famine following, for it will be very severe."

It is said in Genesis 41:56 that "the famine was all over the face of the earth." This was not a local famine as many, if not most, are; but it was far-reaching and very extensive. By the foresight and wisdom of Joseph, however, provision had been made in Egypt during the seven preceding years of plenty, so that the people of other parts sought and received supplies in Egypt. "All countries came into Egypt to buy corn." If all of the countries surrounding Egypt came to buy corn, they must have put away a lot of corn over those seven years. They had enough for their own nation as well as many other nations.

Just as other lands did, Canaan suffered from the famine, which was the reason for Jacob sending his sons down into Egypt. It is also the reason for the settlement in Egypt of the descendants of Abraham. This action was obviously planned by God to bring about the formation of a new nation, begun from a humbling situation.

Historical famines are, by definition, "cyclical famines," meaning that they are caused by unusual weather conditions, plagues, animal or insect infestation, or a similar interruption of normal cycles. These cyclical famines are far different from the "structural famines" that a great many people are experiencing today. Cyclical famines are natural phenomena that God may or may not use to bring about a furthering of His plan for mankind; whereas structural famines are those specifically caused by human beings, because of disobedience to God in farming methods (such as not allowing the land to rest after every seven years) or because of flagrant moral sin by cities or nations (such as idolatry) or in the case of nations warring against each other. Even righteous Abraham suffered temporarily from such cyclical famines, as we read in Genesis 12:10. When Canaan's rains failed, he went to Egypt for food. In the days of his great-grandson Joseph, the rains and rivers everywhere failed for seven years through no fault of his own. We see that famines are not always the result of God's punishment upon people, but they certainly are used that way at times.

As we mentioned, the most famous famine recorded in the Bible is the seven-year famine in Egypt, foretold by Joseph in interpreting Pharaoh's dream. Extending even into Canaan, it eventually brought the rest of Joseph's family to Egypt. Apparently, the seven-year famine was extensively felt, because a record of famine for seven years in the eighteenth century B.C. has been found in China, which agrees with the time of Joseph's seven years of famine in Egypt. Where the Bible said that all of the earth suffered the famine, apparently it was also all the way into China, as well. It is hard to imagine the entire earth suffering from famine conditions

Famine is also mentioned as occurring in the days of the judges. A famine of that time mentioned in Ruth 1:1 was probably owing to the Midianite devastation of the land, cited in Judges 6. It was so severe that Elimelech had to emigrate to Moab, and Naomi his widow did not return for ten years. We know that that was a fairly severe famine for her not to return for that length of time. Famines are mentioned as occurring for three years in the days of David and of Ahab, and in the reign of Zedekiah in Jerusalem when besieged by Nebuchadnezzar. Elijah was kept alive during a famine by the widow of Zarephath. There was famine in the time of Jeremiah during the siege of Jerusalem, after the captivity. Famines have been a regular occurring phenomenon or scourge on the earth.

Throughout the history of man, there have been countless famines, and the causes are numerous.

Although there are many natural causes of famines, sometimes God brought them upon the Israelites as a punishment for sin. The prophet Amos addresses the children of Israel for their sins in the fourth chapter of Amos. He expresses the most essential aspects of prophetic thought, and that is the eminence of God in history. Amos relates a series of events from Israel's past that he interpreted as God's intervention on her behalf. Terrible as these catastrophes were, they were designed by the loving God to alert Israel to her sin and to the certainty of judgment—yet the nation did not return to Him.

The modern day descendants of Jacob—the United States, Canada, Britain, Australia, South Africa, Scandinavia, and the northwestern nations of Europe—had better take heed. "Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall," as the apostle Paul warns us. The destruction of the two World Trade Center towers was a "shot across the bow," in nautical terms, to warn us to repent and return to God; "yet you have not returned to Me," He says. However, Hurricane Katrina was a shot that took down part of the ship's mast to warn us to "prepare to meet [our] God."

Amos vividly illustrates God's permissive will that brings suffering so that His own people can be brought closer to Him.

Amos 4:6 "Also I gave you cleanness of teeth in all your cities. And lack of bread in all your places; yet you have not returned to Me," says the LORD.

A striking description of famine conditions is the prophet Amos' phrase "cleanness of teeth"—clean because there was no food to foul them. This is a depiction of a complete lack of food because Israel did not accept correction and warning ahead of time.

In verse 7, Amos talks about the latter rain that is so important to the full development of the crops. Withheld rain inevitably causes famine.

Amos 4:7-8 "I also withheld rain from you, when there were still three months to the harvest. I made it rain on one city, I withheld rain from another city. One part was rained upon, and where it did not rain the part withered. So two or three cities wandered to another city to drink water, but they were not satisfied; yet you have not returned to Me," says the LORD.

The fact that rain fell on some towns and not others may very well show that God's hand was in the catastrophe. Just as in ancient Israel's case, the suffering that resulted did not lead to repentance. He inspires Amos to say, over and over again in this section, "Yet you have not returned to Me."

Amos 4:9 "I blasted you with blight and mildew. When your gardens increased, your vineyards, your fig trees, and your olive trees, the locust devoured them; yet you have not returned to Me," says the LORD.

It never seemed to cross the minds of the Israelites that the blighted gardens and dying trees should remind them of their spiritual responsibility.

Amos 4:10 "I sent among you a plague after the manner of Egypt; your young men I killed with a sword, along with your captive horses; I made the stench of your camps come up into your nostrils; yet you

have not returned to Me," says the LORD.

The reference to plague and sword recalls the curse of Leviticus 26:25 where God says, "I will bring a sword against you that will execute the vengeance of the covenant; when you are gathered together within your cities I will send pestilence among you; and you shall be delivered into the hand of the enemy." That was prophesied to happen long before it did. God warns His people before He brings things upon them in the way of punishment or judgment.

He would do this if the people walked contrary to Him. The sword in verse 10 refers to war and was a reminder of the long period of warfare with Syria that caused a great famine in Samaria as recorded in II Kings 6. We will take a closer look at that tragedy in a few minutes.

Amos 4:11 "I overthrew some of you, as God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah, and you were like a firebrand plucked from the burning; yet you have not returned to Me," says the LORD.

The point of verses 6 through 11 is that the Israelites had become spiritually hardened. God inspired Amos to restate five times, "Yet you have not returned to Me," because He wanted to make sure that they remembered why these punishments had come upon them and were about to get worse. Chastisement is an aspect of God's dealing with His children in which He uses punishment to bring them back to Him. Of course, suffering does not always have this purpose. There are many reasons why God disciplines us.

Amos 4:12 "Therefore thus will I do to you, O Israel; because I will do this to you, prepare to meet your God, O Israel!"

Israel is not to meet her God in a face-to-face sense here but in her encounter with Him as He intervenes in history to bring about her destruction. The Israelites had already learned of God's intervention; Amos described repeated events in verses 6-11 that were meant to bring Israel to repentance. This was also to be an example to Israel later, down through history, and for us today. The crucial point, "Prepare to meet your God, O Israel!" has an impression of finality. When Israel meets her God, she will finally learn the nature of the coming judgment. The command, "Prepare!" should not be understood as a plea for the people to repent, the reason being that, for these people, the die was already cast.

They refused to turn to God when He chastised them, and now Amos held out no hope for their full-scale repentance. Amos' words in verses 12 and 13 seem to be more of a final, "Here it comes! Get ready for the national calamity about to befall you," than a call to repentance. The people had already received that warning.

Amos 4:13 "For behold, He who forms mountains, and creates the wind, who declares to man what his thought is, and makes the morning darkness, who treads the high places of the earth—The LORD God of hosts is His name."

The historical books of the Bible speak frequently of severe and great famines. One very graphic incident regarding Israel is described in II Kings 6. About 841 B.C., there was a miraculous temporary lull in the war between the Aramean King Ben Hadad II and King Jehoram of Israel.

This respite may have been to teach Israel God's abiding love and concern for His people, to whom he had sent His prophet Elisha.

However, with no evidence of repentance by Israel, God withdrew His protection; and Israel faced a full-scale Syrian invasion. The Arameans were eminently successful, penetrating to the gates of Samaria itself and putting the city under a horrible siege. The lengthy besiegement caused a severe famine, described in II Kings 6:

II Kings 6:24-29 And it happened after this that Ben-Hadad king of Syria gathered all his army, and went up and besieged Samaria. And there was a great famine in Samaria; and indeed they besieged it until a donkey's head was sold for eighty shekels of silver, and one-fourth of a kab of dove droppings for five shekels of silver. Then, as the king of Israel was passing by on the wall, a woman cried out to him, saying, "Help, my lord, O king!" And he said, "If the LORD does not help you, where can I find help for you? From the threshing floor or from the winepress?" Then the king said to her, "What is troubling you?" And she answered, "This woman said to me, 'Give your son, that we may eat him today, and we will eat my son tomorrow.' So we boiled my son, and ate him. And I said to her on the next day, 'Give your son, that we may eat him;' but she has hidden her son."

Jehoram's reaction was one of anguished horror. He tore his robes, revealing his sackcloth garments of grief underneath. He was enraged, and he blamed Elisha for the whole affair and dispatched a messenger to seize and behead Elisha. It is a very, very sobering account of what Israel, God's people, has had to go through. When Jehoram had gathered his composure, he ran after his messenger, hoping to stop him. By divine insight, Elisha knew the details of the whole incident and instructed certain elders who were with him to bar the door of the house until Jehoram could overtake his executioners.

When the king arrived, he was admitted into the house. By this time, Jehoram was convinced that God had pronounced the doom of the city and had given up hope of God's deliverance. It may be that Jehoram realized that since all that had transpired was controlled by God, it carried with it the faintest hope that God might still miraculously intervene. That is why he stopped his messenger from going to behead Elisha, because there was still a glimmer of hope that God would help.

Elisha proceeded to give the king comfort by telling him that by the next day conditions would so improve that the necessities of life would again be available, even though at a substantial price. Jehoram's aide found Elisha's prediction to be preposterous and he would not believe him

and scoffed at it. In the aide's mind, even if God opened heaven and poured down a flood of flour and grain, the famine was so dire that even this would not fulfill Elisha's prediction. The aide's words were filled with ridicule and sarcasm, and his skepticism flowed out. In one sense, that is similar to what people today think of the messages that God's ministers are providing to them. The prophet Elisha assured Jehoram's aide that not only would the prophecy come true, but the officer would see it with his own eyes. However, he would not eat any of it! His faithless skepticism would cause him to miss God's blessing on the people.

It is quite true that God moves in mysterious ways. The way He fulfilled Elisha's inspired prophecy is a case in point. Because four leprous men who lived outside the city gate knew that their situation was desperate, they decided to surrender to the Arameans. This began God's intervention on the Israelites behalf.

II Kings 7:3-8 Now there were four leprous men at the entrance of the gate; and they said to one another, "Why are we sitting here until we die? If we say, 'We will enter the city,' the famine is in the city, and we shall die there. And if we sit here, we die also. Now therefore, come, let us surrender to the army of the Syrians. If they keep us alive, we shall live; and if they kill us, we shall only die." And they rose at twilight to go to the camp of the Syrians; and when they had come to the outskirts of the Syrian camp, to their surprise no one was there. For the Lord had caused the army of the Syrians to hear the noise of chariots and the noise of horses—the noise of a great army; so they said to one another, "Look, the king of Israel has hired against us the kings of the Hittites and the kings of the Egyptians to attack us!" Therefore they arose and fled at twilight, and left the camp intact—their tents, their horses, and their donkeys—and they fled for their lives. And when these lepers came to the outskirts of the camp, they went into one tent and ate and drank, and carried from it silver and gold and clothing, and went and hid them; then they came back and entered another tent, and carried some from there also, and went and hid it.

It is interesting that even though they were starving to death they still remembered to grab gold and silver. We know that God often works in mysterious ways, and that was one example of it. I guess human nature lasts right on to the end.

II Kings 7:9-13 Then they said to one another, "We are not doing right. This day is a day of good news, and we remain silent. If we wait until morning light, some punishment will come upon us. Now therefore, come, let us go and tell the king's household." So they went and called to the gatekeepers of the city, and told them, saying, "We went to the Syrian camp, and surprisingly no one was there, not a human sound—only horses and donkeys tied, and the tents intact." And the gatekeepers called out, and they told it to the king's household inside.

So the king arose in the night and said to his servants, "Let me now tell you what the Syrians have done to us. They know that we are hungry; therefore they have gone out of the camp to hide themselves in the field, saying, 'When they come out of the city, we shall catch them alive, and get into the city.'" And one of his servants answered and said, "Please, let several men take five of the remaining horses which are left in the city. Look, they may either become like all the multitude of Israel that are left in it; or indeed, I say, they may become like all the multitude of Israel left from those who are consumed; so let us send them and see."

Basically, he was saying, "They may die but it will not be any worse than what is happening here in the city."

II Kings 7:14-20 Therefore they took two chariots with horses; and the king sent them in the direction of the Syrian army, saying, "Go and see." And they went after them to the Jordan; and indeed all the road was full of garments and weapons which the Syrians had thrown away in their haste. So the messengers returned and told the king. Then the people went out and plundered the tents of the Syrians. So a seah of fine flour was sold for a shekel, and two seahs of barley for a shekel, according to the word of the LORD. Now the king had appointed the officer on whose hand he leaned to have charge of the gate. But the people trampled him in the gate, and he died, just as the man of God had said, who spoke when the king came down to him. So it happened just as the man of God had spoken to the king, saying, "Two seahs of barley for a shekel, and a seah of fine flour for a shekel, shall be sold tomorrow about this time in the gate of Samaria." Then that officer had answered the man of God, and said, "Now look, if the LORD would make windows in heaven, could such a thing be?" And he had said, "In fact, you shall see it with your eyes, but you shall not eat of it." And so it happened to him, for the people trampled him in the gate, and he died.

That was quite a fulfillment of Elisha's prophecy inspired by God and of God beginning to bring the people out of that horrible famine. A very encouraging incident, as well as a sobering one, and we see that God does have mercy even when He brought punishment on Israel.

He will have compassion on whomever He will. At Sinai, the people sinned flagrantly regarding the golden calf. If God had acted simply in justice, He could have blotted out His people. However, as you know, Moses asked for mercy. Instead, God recalled Moses to the mount and for a second time gave him the tables of commandments—yet not until He had proclaimed to His servant Moses, "I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy." That mercy was seen in sparing sinful Israel.

Romans 9:14-18 What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? Certainly not! For He says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion." So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I may show My power in you, and that My name may be declared in all the earth." Therefore He has mercy on whom He wills, and whom He wills He hardens.

We see there that God can use any situation to glorify Himself. It does not always have something to do with what we have done. As we realize, Joseph had to weather those seven years of famine, but God let him know to prepare for it. God's mercy does not depend on our desire or effort. Mercy, like grace, stands above human effort or worth whenever salvation is concerned. It comes as a free gift, because God is not obligated to show mercy.

Famine plays its part in the background to Jesus' parable of the prodigal son. It was when he had foolishly spent his inheritance that famine struck the land where he was living, reducing him to the meanest conditions. At this point, he came to his senses and began the long road back to his father.

Luke 15:14-20 "But when he had spent all, there arose a severe famine in that land, and he began to be in want. Then he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the swine ate, and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants."' And he arose and came to his father. But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him."

We know the spiritual ramifications here and the lesson that we can learn from it. Two disasters struck him simultaneously: he ran out of money and he ran into a famine—a deadly combination. The first was entirely his own fault. The famine was not his fault, but it increased his problems. People who might have helped him would find their own circumstances more precarious. Food was short and consequently would be high priced. It gave people the perfect excuse for refusing to help. Thus the young man began to be in want. He lacked even the necessities of life.

Disillusionment set in, and finally the young man came to his senses. Hardship has a wonderful way of bringing people to face facts. The prodigal son reflected on the contrast between the

starvation that he was experiencing and the abundance enjoyed, not by his father and brother alone, but by his father's hired servants as well. Even for them there was bread enough to spare.

It is significant that Jesus does not say he went back to his own village or even to his home, but to his father. We see in a spiritual sense—especially when we have strayed from God, left His way of life, and become disobedient—that what we have to do is to pray to our Father in heaven to help us to repent and to overcome the problems that we have so that we can once again be reunited with Him through His Son Jesus Christ. Jesus is certainly implying here, that it is only as we come to an awareness of our spiritual need that we will be prepared to consider repentance.

The gifts of God may be used up, but the love of God never fails. This boy left his father's home, which is a type of walking with and loving our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, to seek his pleasures in the far-off country, which represents the world. He found that all that the world offered him soon failed. Nothing that the world gives can satisfy the craving of human desire. Quite often we hear of men reaching middle age who have had careers in corporations and finding that their lives just have not been fulfilled, and they search for some spiritual fulfillment. The world, with its pleasures and its pursuits, fails to satisfy the yearnings of the heart. The person must return to God and come again under the protection of the sacrifice of the Lamb of God and, as a result, enjoy fellowship with God—a personal intimate relationship.

Let us refer to history for a moment. In looking at the history of mankind, we are never at a loss to find famines striking nations around the world. Between A.D. 1050 and 1350, severe famines struck all known lands, becoming especially severe in Egypt around A.D. 1065 and 1200, in England around A.D. 1314, and in all of Europe during the so-called "Black Death" of the 1350s.

Around 1065, the combined ravages of war and drought caused a famine in Egypt which must have rivaled in severity the seven-year famine under Joseph, approximately 2,800 years previous. During the famine of 1065, a single cake of bread sold for about a day's wages; eggs, three-quarters of a day's wages; and a bushel of grain for more than a day's wages. That was at the beginning of the famine. One woman, according to a historian of the time, gave a necklace worth thousands of dollars for a mere handful of flour. Others flung their jewels into the street.

Finally, the desperate Egyptians resorted to cannibalism. Butchers of men actually "fished" for their victims, letting down meat hooks attached to ropes in search of unwary pedestrians. After the shrieking victims were "hooked and cooked," they were sold on the open market to the most desperate of Egypt's hungry masses. You wonder how it could get worse in the tribulation than that.

The McClintock and Strong Encyclopedia has accounts of two horrible famines in Egypt in: the one I was just reading about in 1065 and also one that occurred around A.D. 1199. I want to read an historian's account of that:

Particular instances of famine which history has handed down to us are truly horrible, and the accounts of them are worthy of notice also,

inasmuch as they present the services of Joseph in behalf of Egypt in their true light. Abdollatif relates thus: "In the year 596 [A.D. 1199], the height of the flood was small, almost without example" [referring to the flood of the Nile of which we spoke earlier].

The consequence was a terrible famine, accompanied by indescribable enormities. Parents consumed their children; human flesh was, in fact, a very common article of food; they contrived various ways of preparing it. They spoke of it and heard it spoken of as an indifferent affair. Men-catching became a regular business. The greater part of the population was swept away by death.

In the following year, also, the inundation did not reach the proper height, and only the lowlands were overflowed. Also much of that which was inundated could not be sown for want of laborers and seed; much was destroyed by worms which devoured the seed-corn; also of the seed which escaped this destruction, a great part produced only meager shoots which perished.

[Compare with this the account in Genesis 41:6: "thin ears and blasted with the east wind."]

Of the horrors in this second year's famine, the year of the flight, 597 [A.D. 1200], Abdollatif, who was an eye-witness, likewise gives a most interesting account, stating that the people throughout the country were driven to the last extremities, eating offal [i.e., garbage and refuse], and even their own dead, and mentions, as an instance of the dire straits to which they were driven, that persons who were burnt alive for eating human flesh were themselves, thus ready roasted, eaten by others. Multitudes fled the country, only to perish in the desert-road to Palestine.

But the most remarkable famine was that of the reign of the Fatimi Khalifeh, El-Mustansir Billah, which is the only instance on record of one of seven years' duration in Egypt since the time of Joseph [A.D. 1064-1071]. This famine exceeded in severity all others of modern times, and was aggravated by the anarchy which then ravaged the country.

Vehement drought and pestilence continued for seven consecutive years, so that they [the people] ate corpses, and animals that died of themselves; the cattle perished; a dog was sold for 5 dinars, and a cat for 3 dinars ... and about 5 bushels of wheat for 100 dinars, and then it failed altogether. He adds that all the horses of the Khalifeh, save three, perished, and gives numerous instances of the straits to which the wretched inhabitants were driven, and of the organized bands of kidnappers who infested Cairo, and caught passengers in the streets by

ropes furnished with hooks and let down from the houses. ...The family, and even the women of the Khalifeh fled, by the way of Syria on foot, to escape the peril that threatened all ranks of the population.

Even the leader, the king, was afraid of being hooked and eaten by somebody. It is a very sobering account that gives us an idea of what might have happened had God not intervened in that famine that Joseph was involved in with Egypt and also an idea of some of the things that will be happening in the upcoming tribulation. Israelites and Gentiles alike scrimmage for something—anything—to eat or drink when severe famine strikes.

In the England of Edward II, a great famine struck in 1314 as a kind of prelude to the upcoming "Black Death." Food was so scarce that even the king had a hard time securing food for his table. Men ate dogs, horses, cats, and, tragically, human babies, as well. Thieves and cannibals were arrested; but when a new criminal was thrown into jail, he was quickly seized upon by the starving inmates and literally torn to pieces for food.

In 1845, the entire potato crop in Ireland rotted from an unexpected blight. The Irish were very dependant on the potato, much as the Orient is on rice. The hunger was so severe that the death toll in Ireland was between 200,000 and 300,000 people. A greater number emigrated to England and America, while thousands of others died on board the emigrant ships. Ireland, a great nation of 8.3 million people in 1845, lost 2 million people to death and emigration in just five years. Even today (as of July 2005), Ireland has but half of her peak population of 1845. Hundreds of years later, Ireland still has not recuperated from that horrible famine.

Although there are many references relating to hunger and to thirst, there are only a few figurative references to famine. The prophet Amos predicted a famine of an entirely different sort from that at which we have been looking. It is not one of a lack of food and water but a famine of hearing the Word of the Lord. This would be a time when part of God's judgment on His people would be the withdrawal of His Word through His prophets and ministers. People would be eager to hear the message, but it would be too late. Those particularly affected would be young people, possibly because while their elders had heard God's Word and had rejected it, the next generation had never had that opportunity.

Amos 8:11-14 "Behold, the days are coming," says the Lord GOD, "That I will send a famine on the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD. They shall wander from sea to sea, and from north to east; they shall run to and fro, seeking the word of the LORD, but shall not find it. In that day the fair virgins and strong young men shall faint from thirst. Those who swear by the sin of Samaria, who say, 'As your god lives, O Dan!' and, 'As the way of Beersheba lives!' they shall fall and never rise again."

Here, Amos pictures people searching for the Word as starving people seek food or water, but they received no word from the Lord. They had rejected the Word, not realizing its essential value to living a life of happiness and true fulfillment. Instead, they willfully pay homage to what

is more important to them than their Creator, and that is their personal idols. They do this by way of the sin, or guilt, of Samaria, which was mainly about idolatry. As you know, Israel was also guilty of Sabbath-breaking. These were two of their greatest sins.

It is important to realize and appreciate the preciousness of the Word of God. If we do not obey and honor it, we cannot find our way to the source of life. Not being able to find the source of spiritual life is like not being able to find edible food and pure water, the necessary support of the body. A human being cannot sustain his own life without both. This is symbolic of the lack of the Word of God as the bread of Life. When the scriptures are ruled out, then the people perish; the vision is gone; hope fades; and there is a general apostasy or falling away from the truth. Amos speaks of a general judgment of spiritual famine coming upon the whole world, a famine of the Word of God because of a scarcity of righteous instruction on how to live God's way of life.

Around the time that Amos prophesied and for a considerable time after, the people had plenty of prophets who provided abundant opportunities for hearing the Word of God, in season and out of season. Probably in the land of Israel there were not as many prophets when their destruction came, as there were in the land of Judah. When the ten tribes went into captivity, they did not see their signs. There were no more prophets, none to show them how long. Psalms 74: 9 expresses a similar frustration: "We do not see our signs; there is no longer any prophet; nor is there any among us who knows how long." They rejected the truth and the ministers that God sent to teach it to them, because God's prophets did not tell them what they wanted to hear. It was just as the apostle Paul said later about people who reject God's truth.

Romans 1:24-25 Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves, who exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.

And, so today, we have such shows as "American Idol," and sometimes the morally weak of the nation are placed on high pedestals and worshipped; and God is rejected.

There will be no congregations for ministers to preach to, nor any ministers to preach, nor any instructions and abilities and gifts given to those who desire to preach to prepare them for their work. The Word of the Lord will be precious and scarce, and as a result there will be no vision. I am speaking generally of the world.

1 Samuel 3:1 Now the boy Samuel ministered to the LORD before Eli. And the word of the LORD was rare in those days; there was no widespread revelation.

There have been many times, actually, that Israel has been without or low on teachers. However, because God's church has always prevailed, there have always been teachers and ministers for the church of God.

They will have the written Word, the Bible, to read but no ministers to explain it to them and to

help them apply the principles found within. It is like having water in the well but nothing with which to draw it out. Amos threatened that they would have plenty of physical bread and water, but their teachers would be removed. It made all the other calamities that they were going through very depressing because they had no prophets to instruct and comfort them from the Word of God, or to give them any hope of being saved from the trouble. Famine of the Word of God is the worst famine and carries the heaviest judgment.

Today, especially, there are many who would not think of a lack of true ministers to teach God's truth as all that serious. They do not think of it as an affliction at all. When our previous church affiliation began to change doctrine and teach heresy, one man said something like this: "I did not realize how important God's truth was until they tried to take it away." Sometimes, we do not realize what we really and truly have until we do not have it, and then it is too late.

Some people are more sensible when it comes to God's truth and will gladly travel a long way to hear a sermon about God's way of life. They are those who will wisely feel the loss of God's merciful gifts that others have foolishly sinned away. Even people that insult and ridicule God's ministers when they had access to them will wish for them to be back, as Saul did for Samuel, when they are deprived of them. Many never know the value of the merciful gifts until they feel the need for them.

When Jesus described in vivid detail the most climactic period in all of human existence, He was referring to events immediately preceding the end or consummation of this present era of human history.

Mark 13:3-8 Now as He sat on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked Him privately, "Tell us, when will these things be? And what will be the sign when all these things will be fulfilled?" And Jesus, answering them, began to say: "Take heed that no one deceives you. For many will come in My name, saying, 'I am He,' and will deceive many. But when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be troubled; for such things must happen, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. And there will be earthquakes in various places, and there will be famines and troubles. These are the beginnings of sorrows."

These are, of course, the signs of the times and the end of the Age. There is a parallel account in Matthew 24:3-14 and also in Luke 21:7-19.

The Greek word *archee* from which *beginnings* is translated is actually a singular word. It specifically means "the beginning" or "the start." The word *sorrows* actually means "birth-pains," a term used to describe the afflictions and woes that are to usher in the coming of the Messiah.

Of the year A.D. 65, the writer Tacitus, in his *Annals* wrote regarding the Roman Empire:

This year, disgraced by so many deeds of horror, was further distinguished by the gods with storms and sicknesses. Campania was

devastated by a hurricane which overthrew buildings, trees, and the fruits of the soil in every direction, even to the gates of the city, within which a pestilence thinned all ranks of the population, with no atmospheric disturbance that the eye could trace. The houses were choked with dead, the roads with funerals: neither sex nor age escaped. Slaves and freemen perished equally amid the wailings of their wives and children, who were often hurried to the pyre by which they had sat in tears, and consumed together with them. *Annals*, xvi., 10-13).

It brings to mind Hurricane Katrina. Not to lessen the impact of it on this nation and make light the suffering of the people down there, but what this nation is going through with Hurricane Katrina pales into insignificance compared to many of the famines that have come on nations before. I have wanted to try to put that into perspective, that as bad and as awful as that is for the people that lie in those areas that were hit by that hurricane, things have happened that have been worse; and there are things to come that will be worse. Because of its extreme nature, famine—along with trouble, hardship, persecution, nakedness, danger, and the sword—is regarded as one of the worst troubles that this world suffers. As such, it stands in sharp contrast to the constant love of Christ, from which nothing can separate us.

Romans 8:35-39 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written: "For Your sake we are killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter." Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Formidable obstacles cannot separate us from the love God extends to us. The apostle Paul lists here frightening trials, affliction, distress, persecution, famine, lack of clothing, danger, or violent death. Paul quotes Psalm 44:22 in verse 36 to show what trials even the people of God face. His conclusion, in verse 37, is that in all these troubles we are winning a glorious victory through the one who loves us. The meaning here is, "We are in the process of winning."

In the external pressures of life, we can be conquering obstacles through the One who loves us. We are not winning through our own strength or intelligence but through Christ. Paul then expands the obstacles to include all other spiritual conflicts that confront us. Then he emphatically declares that none of these things will be able to separate us from the love God manifests, this love that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. The power of God's love is a theme that can never be exhausted. Because of His love and mercy, the righteous are preserved by God in time of famine.

Job 5:20 "In famine He shall redeem you from death, and in war from

the power of the sword."

Fearing God includes reverencing Him, submitting to His authority, obeying His commandments, shunning all forms of evil, and loving others. The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom and it is the whole duty of man. Because of the unpredictability of these famines, the risk is a continuing reason for trusting God for His provision. Here we see the key to surviving physical and spiritual famine is to fear God:

Psalm 33:18-19 Behold, the eye of the LORD is on those who fear Him,
on those who hope in His mercy, to deliver their soul from death, and
to keep them alive in famine.

Although the whole world may come apart, there is one thing that can never fail: "the eye of the Lord," the watchful providence of the Most High, is upon those who fear Him, upon those who hope in His mercy. He is there to watch over and protect us in all sudden dangers and emergencies, so that we will not lose our lives even by accident. He keeps the faithful alive and protected from famine. He does not only prevent our sudden death by an instantaneous intervention of His power, but He keeps us from a lingering death, by extraordinary supplies granted to us in an extraordinary manner—because He is all in all and is everywhere.

Psalm 37:18-19 The LORD knows the days of the upright, and their
inheritance shall be forever. They shall not be ashamed in the evil
time, and in the days of famine they shall be satisfied.

This is a special mark of the divine favor and power toward the faithful of God's church. Elsewhere in this chapter, the psalmist uses a number of synonyms for the upright or godly: *meek*, *poor* (in spirit), *those whose ways are righteous*, and *blameless*. Verse 18 refers to people of integrity. The upright trust in the Lord with patience and hope and do what is good. In contrast, the wicked hoard everything for themselves, but the righteous are like God in that they are gracious. They help the poor by being generous. They fear no evil even in adversity, because they trust in a God who knows them because they have an intimate relationship with Him.

We have an awesome and caring and merciful Heavenly Father and a Savior, Jesus Christ, who reflects His Father, both who love us deeply. Those who fear God are kept alive in famine. In the days of famine they will be satisfied!