

Famine in the Land: When God's Word is Neglected
1 Samuel 3

*“Behold the days are coming’, declares the LORD God, ‘when 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.**”*
Amos 8:11

Introduction: Famines are devastating. Growing up in the comforts of American prosperity means we do not appreciate the effects of prolonged drought and lack of food production that causes massive death tolls and suffering (unless you count not being able to buy toilet paper for a month!). If you have studied your Bible at all, you'll know that famines were an ever present threat, from Jacob's family moving to Egypt (Genesis 41:57) to God imposing judgment on sin (David's choice of judgment – including 3 years of famine (2 Sam. 24:13). In modern times famines have brought the death count to astronomical levels. During the supposed “Great Leap Forward” in China in 1958, a combination of changes in farming policies and regional droughts lead to an estimation of 20-50 million deaths for lack of food. Today, lack of rainfall or capture of rainwater is a challenge around the world, including California, which means we can only water our grass twice a week now (sarcasm alert!)

Famine is characterized by lack of food and water. But this is NOT the worst kind of famine that a society can face. In fact, there has been a historical type of famine that devastates completely, and that is a **famine of hearing the word of the Lord**. This kind of famine is characterized by high levels of *religious activity, possible widespread material gain, even peace from war, but a growing level of spiritual apathy, token worship, moral degradation and corruption*. History is replete with this cycle. In Josiah's rule as King of Judah, though there was a high priest who conducted worship practices, that same high priest **found the book of the Law in the Temple** (2 Kings 22:8), meaning it has been hidden/lost for decades. Josiah wisely listened to it, repented, and reformed the people and the land. Years later as both the Northern Kingdom (Israel) and the Southern Kingdom enjoyed peace and prosperity; there was a growing apathy of worship and justice, so God promised specific judgment:

*“Behold the days are coming’, declares the LORD God, ‘when 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. They shall wander from sea to sea, and from north to east; they shall run to and fro, **to seek the word of the LORD, but they shall not find it.**”*

Amos 8:11-12

Notice that a rejection of the Lord during prosperity led to an inability to find the word in captivity. The same was true of the religious leaders of Jesus' day, as Jesus indicted the Pharisees about their worship:

*“So for the sake of your tradition you have made **void the word of God**. Your hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophecy of you, when he said: ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’”*

Matthew 15:6b-9

In the 16th Century, the rallying cry of the Reformation in Geneva was *Post Tenebras Lux*, which means “After darkness, light”. It rallied around the rediscovery of Biblical truth from the spiritual darkness of the time, where the church controlled the outflow Biblical teaching, rather than training people to know and understand the Bible for themselves. Biblical translation and preaching became hallmarks of the

Protestant movement, putting the Word in the hands of the 'common man' so that they know, love, and obey their God through Jesus Christ.

Even as we look at the landscape of the church today we can see by observation that though religious activity may be high, a true knowledge of God and His Word is shockingly low. 'Churches' and denominations are functioning without actually using Scripture, or if they do, it is to prove text social agendas. I just met with the head of the PCA's missions sending agency, and he pointed out what we have seen in missions. The influx of new candidates for missions is alarmingly low, and a vast number of those who do want to go do not KNOW the Word and are not character qualified. **There is a famine in the land** and the only way to have the rain for the harvest is to repent, return to the Word, and seek the Lord of the harvest Himself. This is exactly what Israel was facing at the beginning of Samuel's life, as God pivoted from Eli's leadership to Samuel's, from neglect of God's Word to embracing the totality of it.

The Context of Famine (3:1)

*Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the LORD in the presence of Eli. And the **word of the LORD was rare in those days; there was no frequent vision.***

God's Word is a gift! But just like any gift, it can easily be taken for granted and ignored. Think of the litany of gifts that you received as a kid, the ones you longed for, asked, begged, and cajoled for, only to have them become garbage can fodder within the year. Gifts are by definition *undeserved*, but we can quickly begin to think that we deserve and will *always have* gifts. This is what happened with Israel and the leadership of Eli in particular, as they put the great gift of God's Word on the shelf, which led to demise, death, and ultimate destruction over time.

The text starts with Samuel serving in the Tabernacle under the leadership of Eli. Most likely, Samuel was now a young-ish boy/man, of 12-15 years old. The word 'boy' here is the same word for David later on in 1 Sam. 17:33 when he was going to fight Goliath ('you are but a youth'). The author continues his juxtaposition of the old system and leader in Eli that was going to be replaced by the new, faithful leader in Samuel. Samuel served without pretense, meaning he was not gunning for Eli's job, but was simply doing what he ought to do and put himself in position to be used by the Lord.

The key phrase or sentence of the entire chapter is "***the word of the LORD was rare in those days; there was no frequent vision.***" This is intended to shock the ears of the reader. Here we are in the place of worship, with the man designated to lead in worship, with the people that God has chosen to lead the world in worship, and He had stopped communicating with them. Remember, at this time in redemptive history, God would communicate His will through *prophets*, who would speak on behalf of God to the people. This meant that God was leading in real time whether it was about leadership or battles to be fought. When He stopped visions it should have signaled to the leadership and people that something was both amiss and needed to change. But as we've seen in our own context, a crazy world denigrating in front of our eyes does NOT motivate repentance, but any other fix we can think of.

Why was God's word rare? Was God fickle or whimsical with communication? The answer is simple: God withheld His Word as judgment on His people when His people refused to obey, follow, and know His Word. We will see this in a few chapters ahead, where King Saul inquired of the LORD out of FEAR from the Philistines gathering against him (1 Sam. 28:5-6), but the **LORD did not answer him!** Why? Because Saul continually trusted himself and did things his own way, directly rebelling and disobeying God (see 1 Sam. 15). Instead of repenting, he went to the witch of Endor who conjured up Samuel, who

gave him the bad news of his demise (28:15-18). In other words, God withheld His Word from Saul when Saul stopped listening to God. The gift had been neglected, and God's grace which leads to repentance would eventually cease when there was no turning from sin.

Does God withhold His Word today? Since God does not communicate directly through prophets anymore but through His complete Scripture, we can say on one hand, "no". But the problems we have today are not from an information end, but on a reception one. **Starvation may not come from absence of food but from lack of appetite.** *"We may have the Scriptures but suffer from deafness, and so the word is rare"* (Dale Davis). People have no ears to hear, since hearing God's Word is truly a divine gift (Mark 4:9-12). When the Word is neglected regularly it gets minimalized, shrinking in influence to the point that it cannot be heard, even when it is read or a sermon or Bible study listened to. *How do we make sure that we avoid a famine of God's Word in our own life/church?*

- **Put away habitual sin** (1 Pet. 2:1) – *"So put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and slander..."* Now notice the context in 1 Peter is longing for pure Spiritual milk, but a pre-requisite for this is putting away, repenting of our sin. Also note that the sins Peter points out are *internal*, taking place in our mind and heart, not just action sins. When we read the Word with agendas or selfish motives, we CANNOT hear it. Remember, Hophni and Phineas followed protocol of worship, which would have included ritual prayers and reading from the Law, but they could not hear it because their sin blinded them.
- **Build a real appetite** (1 Pet. 2:2-3) – *"Like newborn infants, long for (crave) the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation --- if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good."* Ok, if I don't have an appetite for the Word, how do I get it? You get it by doing it! How do I gain an appetite for fruit and vegetables instead of sugar? I stop eating sugar and begin a new intake, which changes what my body craves. Here, Peter gives the illustration of a nursing baby, which is singly minded and motivated by his mother's milk when hungry, and the only way to satisfy is to actually eat, which then leads to growth and continual desire. Some people tend to think that an appetite for God's word just magically appears for some, and they are 'waiting' for that desire to come. Stop it! That is merely an excuse. The only way to crave God's Word is to study, read, obey, delight in, meditate on, pray through, and memorize God's Word.
- **Stay in true fellowship with others** (Hebrews 3:12-14) – *"Take care, brothers, lest here be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called 'today', that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end."* - This is no small thing. Too many declared followers of Christ try to function OUTSIDE of true fellowship, which is purposeful, familial, and living relationships with fellow Christians who hold the same values, point us to the same Christ, and understand the same trials and temptations we face. When people take themselves out of fellowship, out of hearing the Word preached but also played out daily in relationships, we begin to have a narrow focus on ourselves, and deception then has fertile ground to operate. There is no such thing as a healthy Christian who cuts themselves off from fellowship in God's church.
- **Make Knowing God your goal** (Phil. 3:10) – It is clear that Eli had ceased to know His God. He was dull to God's voice because he had simply gone through the motions for so long. He had lost the fervor that Paul had in a transformed view of life in pursuit of the Lord, *"...that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and my share in His sufferings becoming like Him"*

in death.” When knowing God in Christ, upholding His glory and honoring His name fails to be a goal, tokenism rules. We show up on a Sunday, but we hear nothing except all the noise in our head about what we have to do in the coming week. We stare at the pages of our Bible but comprehend nothing because we have no greater goal except trying to knock off the next text on the list. We lose the sense on **anticipation, awe, and wonder** when our ears get dull. One of the most deceptively sad phrases I’ve heard is that *church or the Christian life is BORING*. It’s like saying the Grand Canyon is just a hole in the ground. If that is our point of view, it is an “us” problem.

God’s Grace in Famine (3:2-14)

*“Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him”
(v. 7)*

In the midst of judgment God always gives a message of hope and opportunity for redemption. That is why we pray for our children, neighbors, co-workers, and national leaders that they would turn from their sin, whatever it is, and experience the joy of having their sins forgiven and knowing the God who created them through Jesus Christ. Here, we see a tragic story of a man whose heart had grown cold to the Lord and the judgment he faced, but the Lord simultaneously opening up the eyes and mind of a young man who was chosen to lead the nation.

The story is simple but profound. In the middle of the night, God began to audibly call Samuel. Since God had not yet spoken to Samuel as a prophet, he assumed it was Eli calling him. So three times he went through the same motions: got up, went to Eli to see what he wanted, and was told to go back to sleep since he was just hearing things. But Eli was also wise enough to eventually understand what was taking place: God was speaking. He told Samuel to respond *“speak, LORD, for your servant hears.”*

What Samuel heard was not only hard to hear, but it was ultimately a gracious word from the Lord. God’s grace is seen:

- **His Word had come again** – Even in the midst of extreme wickedness among his people and leadership, God was once again bringing His prophetic Word through a new prophet. Remember, any type of true revival will happen when God’s Word is heard, loved, and obeyed. Though His people had grown cold toward Him, His love still blazed for His own – which is still true today.
- **HE WAS going to act** – *“Behold, I am about to do a thing in Israel...”* If our future hope was based on anything we could do, on our creativity, obedience, or effort, we’d be in all kinds of trouble. But God shows His grace by His own actions that are consistent with His nature. God did not act because Samuel was such a good guy, but instead chose to save and use Samuel for His good pleasure. We pray that God would act, even now, for His own glory, so we can say with the Psalmist, ***“Not to us, O LORD, not to us, but to your name give glory, for the sake of your steadfast love and faithfulness!”*** (Psalm 115:1)
- **His Grace dealt with sin** – What God was about to make happen was judgment on Eli and his family. It had been several years since the original prophecy of judgment, but God was going to follow through on His word. God was going to respond to the clear sin of Eli, that he knew his sons were committing blasphemy and **did not restrain them**. Because of this, there was no atonement for his sons and no hope for the future of the line as priests. ***Does this seem harsh?*** Absolutely! Sin always deserves judgment, and must be paid for. God is consistent in dealing with our sin, not overlooking it, but paying FOR it. *“Now the law came in to increase the*

trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.” (Rom. 5:19-20). God deals with our sin by GRACE, which means He gives us forgiveness we do not deserve because He was willing to place all of our sin on Jesus so that we could be reconciled through Him. This is the good news of a gracious gospel.

The Full Counsel Reigns Against Famine (3:16-4:1)

*“And Samuel grew, and the LORD was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba knew that Samuel was established as a **prophet of the LORD**. And the LORD appeared again at Shiloh, for the LORD revealed himself to Samuel at Shiloh **by the word of the LORD**. And the word of Samuel came to all Israel.”*

We like the idea of a la carte, where we can pick and choose what we will eat or what services we will actually use. There is a deep problem when we view the word of God as an a la carte menu, picking and choosing what we'll listen to, major on, or obey. God's love? Yes! God's wrath? Nope! Grace, forgiveness, kindness, patience...yes, yes, yes, yes! Wrath, judgment, punishment, suffering...no, no, no, no! Churches that only teach one side of this coin will **FEEL** like they are loving and relevant, but there is no power to change or transform since it does not deal with the entirety of the problem of our human condition, namely our sin and rebellion against a holy and just God. Speaking the truth in love demands that we share the good and bad news, the hard and harsh realities so that we can infuse the glorious and gracious ones.

Samuel received his first word from the Lord and it was a harsh one. It was a negative judgment against his mentor and spiritual father, and far from delighting in it, he was afraid to tell Eli about the vision. He did NOT want to be the bearer of bad news, did NOT want to hurt or disappoint someone he loved, and did NOT want to see someone in authority in pain. **But that is exactly what a commitment to God's Word demands.** When Paul was with the Ephesian elders, he served with humility and tears, in public and house to house, proclaiming a message of repentance toward God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. He testified of the gospel of the grace of God and did not **shrink from declaring to them the whole counsel of God** (Acts 20:19-27). This is extremely important to avoid famine. We must understand the whole of God's character and lean into the hard realities of sin and rebellion so that we can offer the sweet joys of forgiveness and hope. Here, Eli showed that though his spiritual senses had grown callous, he still understood who God was and how He operated. He commanded his young protégé to give him the whole message that he took as being from the Lord's hand.

*Post Tenebras Lux...*After darkness comes the light! Under the leadership of Eli, there was spiritual darkness, but God brought the light back. The people of Israel looked for cultural answers for spiritual problems, and God once again reminded them that their biggest need was to be reconciled with Him, to follow Him, and to turn from their rebellion. This is still the issue today. One of the most encouraging things I've heard from our church over the last year is people who come up and share about their own growth in studying God's Word for themselves, or when I hear how individuals are stepping into teaching opportunities in Bible studies or shepherding groups. The health of this church and our effectiveness moving forward is directly tied to our appetite for God's Word. May God continue to be gracious to open our eyes, soften our hearts, and give us ears to hear, so that we too would have God reveal Himself by His Word.