

Famine and Fullness

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Date: 22 May 2016

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[0 : 0 0] Lord, open our eyes that we might behold wonderful things from your word. Soften our hearts that we might receive your word. Transform our wills that we might be people who do it.

And loosen our tongues that they might proclaim it. And we ask this for the glory of your son, your living word, in whose name we pray. Amen. I want to begin tonight's Bible talk by talking to you about famine.

A famine is an acute or general shortage of primary foods, as you know. One of the great documented instances of famine is the Great Irish Famine of 1844.

It began when disease struck potato crops. And before long, acre upon acre of Irish farmland was just covered with black rot caused by blight.

Harvests failed. Food prices soar. The subsistence farmers in Ireland could no longer pay rent to their landlords. Those who had eaten the rotten potatoes became sick.

[1 : 0 3] And entire villages were consumed with cholera and typhus. And people started dying in droves. Landlords evicted hundreds of thousands of peasants.

And the poor and the dying were then crowded into disease-infected workhouses. Other landlords paid for their tenants to emigrate, sending hundreds of thousands of Irish to America and other English-speaking countries.

But even emigration was no panacea, for the ship owners crowded hundreds of desperate Irish people into rickety vessels labelled as coffin ships. And in many cases, those ships reached port only after losing one-third of their passengers to disease, hunger and other causes.

There were as many as one million men, women and children who died in the Irish famine of 1846 to 1850. Famines are awful, terrible, terrifying events.

They affect the very core of human existence, the need for sustenance and for food and for water and for health. And I think that that is why God uses the analogy of famine at various parts and in various places of Scripture.

[2 : 2 1] You see, at various times in the Bible, God talks about a spiritual famine. The most famous example is Amos chapter 8, verses 11 to 13. I'm going to read it to you. Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord God, when I will send a famine on the land.

Not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the word of God. And they shall wander from sea to sea and from north to east.

They shall run to and fro and seek the word of the Lord, but they shall not find it. In that day, the lovely virgins and the young men shall faint for thirst. The language is different, but the situation is similar in 1 Samuel chapter 3.

For as we open 1 Samuel 3, and I encourage you to have your Bibles open with me so that you can follow with me and check it all out. But we are told that there is a famine of the word of God in Israel.

Look at the second half of verse 1. We're told that in those days the word of the Lord was rare. There were not many visions. Can you hear it? The word of the Lord was rare.

- [3 : 27] The point is this. You see, just as we human beings need bread and water and crops to keep us physically alive, so God's people need God's word to nourish and feed their spiritual lives.
- And without the word of God, they will waste away. They will starve. They'll be prone to all sorts of spiritual diseases. And they'll be exposed to all sorts of spiritual enemies.
- And they'll be tempted to turn to all sorts of alternative sources of sustenance that are not good for them. And their spiritual existence will be in dire straits. You see, the people of God are a people who live by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.
- Without the word of God, they are without the presence and guidance of God. They lack what is essential to life and in life. And Moses made that clear in Deuteronomy when he said, a man, by which he meant people, people shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.
- So that is the situation in 1 Samuel chapter 3. So let's see what God does to this situation. And let's see how he addresses the need of his people. And as we do, I think we'll find out some timeless truths about the God of Israel and, of course, about our God.
- [4 : 46] We'll find things to nourish our souls and our lives. There'll be food to sustain us in difficult times. For we too, you see, are people who live by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.
- So let's start by having a look at 1 Samuel chapter 3, verses 1 to 3. First, we're introduced to Samuel. He is still a boy, a lad, a young man. That's what the word means that is used here.
- But remember chapter 2. Chapter 2 also told us that he is a young man who is growing in stature and favor with God and with the people of God. Second thing is we're introduced to the Lord.
- Now, throughout the first few chapters, we've seen the Lord at work. He's been active in closing the womb of Hannah and then in opening the womb of Hannah. He's been active in planning toward a king and a priest of his own choice to rule over the people of God.
- He's also been active in the growth of Samuel. Third, in verse 2, we are introduced to Eli. Now, what we know of Eli from chapters 1 and 2 is that he had not been strong as a leader of the people of God.
- [5 : 52] He hadn't been as strong as he should be in his family life as well and his life amongst the people of God. He was not a strong, vibrant leader of the people of God. Perhaps not even as faithful as he might have been.
- The end result is that his sons have become grossly corrupt. They are cruelly dominating the people of God and they are defrauding God himself. And in all likelihood, it is that corruption that has led to a situation where the word of the Lord is rare.
- And given that chapter 2 told us that the sons of Eli did not know the Lord, then they're not very likely solutions to the problem of God's word being very rare, are they? What's more, Eli can't perform the task.
- For in verses 2 and 3, we go on to explain that Eli is nearing the end of his life. Okay, so there's the context of this chapter.
- We know that God has determined that he will move on from the house of Eli. He told us that in the last chapter. We know that God hates his people being defrauded and without his word. We know that God is at work in this lad, Samuel.
- [6 : 59] And we close this section with Samuel at sleep in the very depths of the temple. It's not yet morning. And we know that because the lamp of God is still on.

You see, this lamp of God was the sacred flame that was set up in the tabernacle, just outside the curtain near where the Ark of the Covenant was. And it was to light, stay alight till morning. So the reference to it being still alight means morning has not yet come.

It is still evening. And there is Samuel with the symbol of God's presence. And we expect God to do something, don't we? And he does. Look at verse 4.

Then the Lord called Samuel. Now, the story in itself is clear. God calls Samuel four times. We had it brilliantly read tonight. Samuel thinks it's Eli calling him. However, it gradually dawns on Eli that it is, in fact, the Lord that is calling him.

And so in verse 9, Eli tells Samuel how to respond when he next hears it. He is to say, speak, Lord, for your servant is listening. And sure enough, in verse 11, the Lord speaks to Samuel.

[8 : 08] Samuel hears and responds. But I want you to notice that some of the things that we're told as the story proceeds. In particular, I want you to focus just back a bit on verse 7. Let's read it.

For Samuel did not yet know the Lord. The word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. Now, notice some things about this. First, I want you to notice the words that are used in relation to Samuel.

We're told that Samuel did not yet know the Lord. Samuel, you see, may be growing in stature and in favor with both God and the people. However, his growth is not yet complete as a person.

For he still needs one fundamental characteristic. If he is to be God's man, he still needs to know the Lord. He still needs to experience.

Sorry, he still needs an intimate and personal understanding and knowledge of God. And that knowledge needs to be reflected in his life and actions. Because that's what it means to know the Lord. It means to not only cognitively know, but to know in practice.

[9 : 10] Second thing I want you to notice is that only God can grant this gift. That is the point of the second half of the verse. The word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. Because that's what you need if you're going to know the word of the Lord.

You need God's revelation. To know God only comes, you see, from that means. By God revealing himself.

And God's word can only come from God himself. And that brings me to the third thing I want you to notice. I want you to notice something that is not explicitly said in the passage, but something that sits underneath the surface of everything that happens here and that has happened in the preceding two chapters.

What do we learn about God here? We learn that God is a God of supreme mercy and grace, don't we? You see, God knows his people's situation.

He knows that they are under degraded and corrupt leadership. We know that he knows it because we've seen him acting on it already. He knows that they are languishing under a famine. He knows that they are without the essentials of spiritual life.

[10 : 11] That is the word of God. And so he acts in judgment on the one hand and in kindness and grace on the other. He acts in judgment in dealing with the priesthood and he acts in kindness and grace by revealing his word to this lad.

You can see the point, can't you? It's a timeless truth. And it is this. We humans have a desperate need, don't we? Our desperate need is for God's grace and mercy.

Mercy. And God is the God. This God, the Lord, is the God of mercy and of grace. And so he acts here. He speaks his word and he opens up this vehicle for the declaration of his word.

Now, this is the God that we know so well, isn't it? This is the God who does the same in Jesus Christ, isn't it? This is the God who knows our darkness, our lostness, our inability to save ourselves, our famine of the word of God, our need for a word of help and rescue.

And this is the God who sends his son into the world, his son who is the very word of God to the world. Listen to it in John chapter 1 verse 14 and then verses 16 to 18.

[11 : 21] Don't look it up, just listen. Listen, this is where Jesus is called the word of God. The word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. And we have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only, the one and only son who came from the father, full of grace and truth.

Out of his fullness, we have all received grace in place of grace already given. Grace received in place of grace already given. For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

No one has ever seen God, but the one and only son who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the father has made him known. You see, that's the same God as we see acting back in 1 Samuel.

But let's return to 1 Samuel chapter 3. In verses 10 to 18, we see a prophet at work. In verses 10 to 14, he listens to God, give his word to him.

Then in verse 17, Eli says, well, basically Eli says, do the task of a prophet. You are to be uncompromisingly straight and truthful. That's my summary of what he's saying.

[12 : 30] Tell me the truth. He talks about his role to speak truth in the sight of God and God's severe judgment. So he basically says to Samuel, don't, well, this is what he says, don't hide it from me.

May God deal with you ever so, be it ever so severely, if you hide from me anything he told you. In other words, tell me the truth, lad, be a prophet. And so we're told in verse 18 that Samuel performs a prophetic role.

He tells Eli everything. He hides nothing from him. And Eli responds, as all of God's people when confronted with the word of God should do. He says, he is the Lord.

Let him do what is good in his eyes. Now, in our previous talk, Eli didn't get very good press, did he? Last week, not very good press at all.

But in verse 18, Eli is shown to be a man of character and integrity. You see, he may be old at this point. He may be weak as a leader. He may be physically weak and blind.

[13 : 30] He may be psychologically weak and crushed by the behavior of his sons. He may be under the curse of God and the judgment of God. But this man at this point still has character.

He still has integrity. And he still has the courage to surrender totally to God's will, despite its horrible contents. Eli may not have been all that he could have been. But he's still God's man, submitting to God's rule.

Now, let's turn to our final verses. Have a look at verses 19 through to chapter 4, verse 1. And the Lord was with Samuel as he grew up, and he let none of Samuel's words fall to the ground.

And all Israel, from Dan to Beersheba, recognized that Samuel was attested as the prophet of the Lord. And the Lord continued to appear at Shiloh, and there he revealed himself to Samuel through his word.

And Samuel's word came to all Israel. Can you hear the breaking of the famine? It's wonderful, isn't it? It comes just as a trickle in verses 10 to 18.

[14 : 33] But now it's coming as a flood. The Lord continued to be with Samuel, and the Lord let none of his words fall to the ground. You see, all Israel recognized, here was a prophet.

And a prophet is a bringer of the word of God to a famine-stricken land. And where there were not many visions in verse 1, now did you notice? The word of the Lord continued to appear.

That is, it just kept coming at Shiloh. And where the word of the Lord was scarce, the Lord now revealed himself to Samuel through his word. And the word of Samuel, which came from the Lord, came to all Israel.

What started with a famine became a flood of wealth and productivity. And God in his grace gave his people their greatest need, which is his word. Which, by the way, is why we spend so much time on it here at Holy Trinity.

Because that is what we need. We need it explained and we need to soak it in. God knows that we don't live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. So there's 1 Samuel in chapter 3 in brief outline.

[15 : 36] Now what I want to do at the rest of this talk is to think about our own situation and what God might or might not be saying to us through it. Now the first thing I need to say is that our situation is very different from that of 1 Samuel chapter 3.

You see, I am not, although people have told me I look like one, I'm not an ancient Israelite connected with the temple at Shiloh. We are Christians who love the Lord Jesus.

We therefore have a true prophet and a priest king, the Lord Jesus Christ. We no longer need some of the things that ancient Israelites needed. That means we need to be very careful about simply transforming what we have here into our own situation.

As most preachers on this chapter tend to do. For example, I think it's a wrong reading of this chapter saying it's a call to ministry. And to apply it to you. And challenge you all now to respond and hear the word of the Lord and go into ministry.

I don't think that's what it's about. And I don't think that's how it should be used. I think it's wrong to simply read other aspects of our situation into an ancient text and see them as templates for the daily Christian walk.

[16 : 47] It is not a text or a promise as to how God will act in our lives. So what does that mean? What do we make of a text like this? How do we deal with it? How is it still the word of God to us as well as to an ancient audience?

And are there timeless truths here that we can bring to our situation? Well, I think there are some. And I think they spring from this passage and they gain added impact from other parts of the Bible as we move through the Bible.

My first point is this. And you've got the points there listed on my outline. My first point arises out of the theme of the famine of the word of God. Now, I think the very first thing I need to say comes from a larger biblical perspective.

You see, the New Testament tells us that God has dealt fully and finally with the issue of famine in the word of God. Hebrews chapter 1 verses 1 to 3 helps us think about this.

Turn in your Bibles to Hebrews. If someone finds a page number, they can yell it out for me. Hebrews chapter 1 verses 1 to 3. Otherwise, you can just work from Revelation back and you'll hit Hebrews before too long.

[17 : 55] 1-2-0-4. Thank you, Stephen. It reads like this. In the past, God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways.

But in these last days, he has spoken to us by his son, whom he appointed heir of all things and through whom also he made the universe. Now, I wonder if you can see the point that is being made here.

The point is that although God may have used prophets in the past, such as Samuel, he has spoken a clearer and more definitive word now.

In these last days, which is every day since the Lord Jesus was here. In these days, God has spoken to us by his son. In other words, in these last days, God has spoken the greatest and the clearest word that he can by sending his son into the world and having that coming recorded.

This knowledge of Jesus is therefore now out in the public domain. It's been recorded in the pages of scripture for all of us to read. Or on the lips of preachers as they proclaim it.

[19 : 11] So in one sense, we are no longer in spiritual famine. God has poured out this wealth of hunger ending information and the famine has gone. It is ended.

Point two. It also it comes from one Samuel chapter three, verse seven. So sorry, you've got to flip back now. Back to one Samuel chapter three, verse seven. Remember that verse? We read it before.

It says, now, Samuel did not yet know the Lord. The word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. You see, it's clear from the rest of the Bible that our situation is in some sense similar to Samuel's.

You see, just as in Samuel's day, knowing God is much more than just knowing information. Knowing God needs God to actually reveal himself to us. Now, we know he's already done that.

He's revealed himself in Jesus Christ. However, the Bible makes clear that in order to truly apprehend that information, we need a deep work of God. We need God to be at work in us.

[20 : 13] Jesus himself says this in Matthew 11, 27. Just listen. He says, all things have been committed to me by my father. No one knows the father except the son. And no one knows the father except the son.

Sorry. No one knows the son except the father. No one knows the father except the son. And those to whom the son chooses to reveal him. The point is that even knowing Jesus needs a work of God.

And the thing we learn from 1 Samuel and the New Testament alike is that we can trust God to be gracious and kind in this area. He hates his people being without his word and without the knowledge of him.

So God's desire and inclination and promise is to meet famine with richness. So what's the Christian response to this? How do Christians respond to the fact that in order to know God, God must reveal himself to people?

Well, Christians pray. They ask God to be at work. They ask him to turn people to himself, to soften hearts, to make people open the message of the gospel.

[21 : 15] That's why, you know, I spend time praying for my sermon each week. Because I can be clever with words. I can do all my work on the text. I can bring it to you without God being at work in it.

It's not going to go very far. And that brings me to my third point. The third point also comes from asking how God makes his word known in our world. You see, the people in the Old Testament had parts of the Old Testament.

So in one sense there was no real famine of the word of God in their day. They had the word of God in part written. But what they didn't have was people of God who knew God, knew the God who could and could proclaim what God was saying to them in their own situation.

Our situation is, you see, friends, that we have the word of God incarnate, don't we? The word of God in human form. Jesus Christ. We also have the word of God written.

The scriptures. But God's chosen means for making his word known in his world is what? Proclamation. That is sharing that message with people.

[22 : 22] And that is, we need the word of God spoken or proclaimed. And it needs to be spoken and proclaimed by people who know the Lord who is behind those words.

And friends, that is the role of the people of God. If we're thinking about ourselves as a new congregation, a new church, as it were, what is our role as God's gathered people? It is to make sure God's word is proclaimed and make sure that we take it from here to proclaim it to others.

This is our role as God's church, as God's individual people. Our duty and our joy is to proclaim what we've seen and heard in Jesus Christ. And that leads me on to my fourth point.

You see, while we have the riches of God's full and final word who is in Jesus Christ, and while we have translation after translation of the Bible that can tell us about Jesus Christ, and while we can carry it, and I'm not even carrying it, on my phone, everywhere that I go, I think it is possible for us as God's people to create a self-imposed famine.

I think it's possible for leaders of God's people to create a situation of famine for God's people. I think it's possible to have people who name the name of Christ, who meet in the name of Christ, but have placed themselves in a situation of famine.

[23 : 43] And friends, I can tell you that today in Melbourne, it has happened. There have been people meeting in things called churches, who have not had the word of God spoken to them this day.

It happens every Sunday. Some of them never hear the word of God. Some of them rarely have it read to them.

They don't have public reading of scripture. They don't study it. It's not preached about. It's not explained. And in its place, we hear platitudes or moralisms or pop psychology.

And you have to look at church billboards largely to see that. This is a disastrous situation for the people of God. But we need to be vigilant if we are to avoid throwing ourselves into famine.

We need to consciously ensure that we are rich with the word of God, both personally and corporately. Not just that we have it in our possessions and on our phones. That means our leaders must be students of the Bible.

[24 : 46] They must give themselves wholeheartedly and deeply to it. And if they're not, tell them to go and do it. We must free them up to do it. But we must also ourselves, whoever we are, be students of the Bible ourselves.

So see, as I look around, here's a test that I used to use on people when I was a student worker. I used to say to them, I think that you should know you should apply the same diligence to your study of the Bible as you apply to at least one full subject at university.

And then for the rest of your life, you ought to keep going. How do you go if that's you? Do you apply the same amount of effort to studying the Bible as you apply to keeping in your particular discipline or workplace?

And the study you give to that? I suspect most of us don't. And that's why so many Christians are illiterate. So many people don't know the front of the Bible from the back of it.

They don't know where Exodus is even. And that's only the second book. You know, we must determine that we feed ourselves with the word of God in our family life, our private life, our corporate lives.

[25 : 58] That we speak the word of God to each other, that we sing the word of God to each other, and that all we do is saturated with the word of God in Jesus Christ.

So let me just speak frankly to you. You see, this is the start of a new congregation. And I want you to think about what you want to distinguish this congregation.

What characteristic do you want it to be that draws people here? What is the thing that you want to advertise to your friends? Now, I know some of you would already advertise this, but it's worth asking anyway.

And I think the question is, is this church a place which is rich in God's word? Is this congregation a congregation that is rich in God's word? If it is characteristic, then I want to urge you to excel even more.

The reputation that you have, that you want to foster, is a reputation for being a congregation that loves God. And a congregation that loves God will love the word of God.

[27 : 05] So on this, our opening service together, I want to urge you to do this more and more. For our world desperately needs the word of God.

And it desperately needs congregations that are determined to bring the word of God to the people of God and the world of God. And that brings me to my fifth point. You see, one of the great ways to avoid a self-imposed famine of the word of God is to live the word of God.

Now, how do we go about this? How do we start living the word of God? Well, Isaiah 66 verse 2 gives one of the great hints in the Bible, one clue. It talks about the sort of people to whom God looks.

And let me read it to you. It goes like this. It's well worth memorizing. Isaiah says, but this is the one to whom I will look. To the humble and contrite in spirit who trembles at my word.

Let me repeat it. It's a great one. This is the one to whom I will look. To the humble and contrite in spirit who trembles at my word. Now, let me close tonight by urging you to be these sorts of people.

[28 : 16] That is, in fact, let me urge you to be this sort of congregation, this sort of church. Let's be people who humble ourselves enough to put ourselves under the spotlight of God's word.

Let's hear what it says. And let's tremble at its message. And let's struggle to work out what it means and to apply it. And let's tremble so much that we believe it, obey it, speak it, and urge each other to live it.

Let's pray. Father, please make us those who long desperately for your word.

That do as much as we can to ensure that it's rich in our private lives and in our congregational lives. Father, may we be those who are humble and contrite in spirit.

Who listen to your word. Who read your word. But most of all, who tremble at it. And Father, we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

[29 : 16] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.