

“A Famine of Hearing the Words of the LORD”

Amos 8:1-14 This is what the Sovereign LORD showed me: a basket of ripe fruit. ² "What do you see, Amos?" he asked. "A basket of ripe fruit," I answered. Then the LORD said to me, "The time is ripe for my people Israel; I will spare them no longer. ³ "In that day," declares the Sovereign LORD, "the songs in the temple will turn to wailing. {3 Or "the temple singers will wail} Many, many bodies-- flung everywhere! Silence!" ⁴ Hear this, you who trample the needy and do away with the poor of the land, ⁵ saying, "When will the New Moon be over that we may sell grain, and the Sabbath be ended that we may market wheat?"--skimping the measure, boosting the price and cheating with dishonest scales, ⁶ buying the poor with silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, selling even the sweepings with the wheat. ⁷ The LORD has sworn by the Pride of Jacob: "I will never forget anything they have done. ⁸ "Will not the land tremble for this, and all who live in it mourn? The whole land will rise like the Nile; it will be stirred up and then sink like the river of Egypt. ⁹ "In that day," declares the Sovereign LORD, "I will make the sun go down at noon and darken the earth in broad daylight. ¹⁰ I will turn your religious feasts into mourning and all your singing into weeping. I will make all of you wear sackcloth and shave your heads. I will make that time like mourning for an only son and the end of it like a bitter day. ¹¹ "The days are coming," declares the Sovereign LORD, "when I will send a famine through the land-- not a famine of food or a thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the words of the LORD. ¹² Men will stagger from sea to sea and wander from north to east, searching for the word of the LORD, but they will not find it. ¹³ "In that day "the lovely young women and strong young men will faint because of thirst. ¹⁴ They who swear by the shame {14 Or by Ashima; or by the idol} of Samaria, or say, 'As surely as your god lives, O Dan,' or, 'As surely as the god {14 Or power} of Beersheba lives'-- they will fall, never to rise again."

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I remember the Ethiopian famine of 1983-85. I had just graduated from high school. The Christian Children’s Fund was routinely running TV commercials and placing ads in magazines of little black children with hollow, begging eyes and bloated bellies sitting in the dirt covered in flies holding an empty bowl. Those ad’s bothered me not because they were real pictures of real famine. They played on our emotions by exploiting the suffering of real human beings. There was also the suspicion that the CCF was not getting the money where it needed to go because they were spending a whole lot on advertisement. Getting aide for Ethiopia was a difficult sell because of the common belief that government officials were hoarding the grain to sell it and get wealthy from it. Well, Bob Geldof to the rescue. You rock and roll fans may remember Bob Geldof organizing the Band Aid project and recording “Do They Know It’s Christmas?” and also the Live Aid concerts. In total some 900,000 Ethiopians died in that famine, mostly children, but it is no secret that the money raised by Geldof’s projects saved the lives of 6,000,000. The famine was that bad.

No one ever mentioned why this famine was happening. Everyone just assumed the myth that famines are caused by droughts or blight in poor countries where there are too many people for the land to produce enough food.

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Henry Kissinger once said that it is nature's control on population. I, the typical teenager with the bright ideas thought the reason was obvious. “You can't grow food in a desert. Move the people!” I did not know that Ethiopia was undergoing a civil war where US-backed rebels were trying to overthrow the Soviet-backed government. The civil war was destroying agriculture in Ethiopia which had until then been having record crops. In 1982-83 there was as drought, but there was still food production in the region throughout the whole event. So, if there was food available, why were people, children starving to death? Well...it was because the people couldn't afford to buy the food because they had lost their jobs and been displaced because Ethiopia was a pawn nation of the Cold War. Even though food was around there was still a shortage of it. So, the people who grew it were demanding higher prices for it. That's Economics 101, the Law of Supply and Demand. When supply is scarce and there is high demand, the price goes up. But...when the supply of Xbox's or Elmo dolls is short around Christmas times retailers don't start price gouging. That's bad business. So why is it that when food is the commodity in short supply that the prices sky-rocket? They're doing it right now. We are right now in the midst of a global grain crisis? Famines in poorer nations will start occurring in the next few years if the price-gauging of food grains is not stopped. But, hey, that's free market economics.

Back to Ethiopia, another reason for the famine was that the Ethiopian government was refusing to let food aid into areas that supported the rebels. Starving your enemy is nothing new. You might remember that Stalin let the people of Ukraine starve in 1932-33 because the farmers were refusing to turn their family farms over to the government to become collectives. Refusal to follow the economic policies of the rich and powerful is another reason people starve. Food shortages today are greatest in developing countries that do not want to base their economies on the global free market system. Did you know that the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund place stipulations on the loans they make to developing nations that cause these nations to turn their home grown food into a commodity to be sold on the global market so that it can be guaranteed they can pay off the loan. Since the home grown food is being sent elsewhere, food to eat has to be imported. This causes food prices to skyrocket in those nations and it won't be long before the people of these nations will not be able to afford food and famine will set in even though they are food producers. You, like I, are probably saying “that's stupid” and it is, but it is the reality of the world we live in and in the least it allows us to eat cheap bananas and drink coffee and tea. To wrap this up, I'm trying to make the argument that famine is not what happens when there are too many people and not enough food. Famine happens when people can no longer afford to buy food and what causes that is the greed and powerlust of the rich and the powerful.

I've used the Ethiopian Famine of 1983-85 as an example because I think it is an event within our memory that illustrates quite well what was going on in the days of Amos. The Ethiopia Famine is what it looks like when the needy are trampled and someone is trying to do away with the poor of the land. It's what it looks like when people have to pay for the sweepings of grain with the only pair of shoes they have and the only reason for it is the greed and powerlust of the

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rich and powerful. To the rich and the powerful and those who were benefiting from their actions in Amos' day the LORD said, “I will spare them no longer.” “I will never forget anything that they have done.” In addition to sending them into exile, he adds, “I will send a famine, not a famine of hunger or of thirst, but of hearing the words of God.”

What is it to hear the words of God? Hearing in ancient Israel was not simply a matter of hearing sounds or hearing words. It was hearing those words and taking them to heart and living according to them. I cannot imagine what it would be like to pick up my Bible and read or to come to church on Sunday and listen to the Scripture readings – forget the sermon, just the Scripture readings – and not hear and understand what these words have to do with me. Let me rephrase that a bit, I can't imagine reading my Bible or hearing it read in church and not caring to understand what these words have to do with me. Or even worse, understanding what they say but not caring to let them apply to me. It's like being above the law, but rather above the words of God. I know these words have authority over me for my benefit. To disregard them or to selectively choose what applies to me is like telling the LORD “Shut up! My life is my own and I'll live it according to what seems best for me. So, here's my twenty bucks just bless me with good fortune and I'll be on my way.” Imagine living in a world where there is a famine of hearing the words of the LORD, when even those who claim to be God's people won't hear and take to heart and obey the words of the LORD they hear every Sunday. That was Amos' day, the day when God said “I'll take my words away and let the chaos of the consequences of your idolatrous greed and powerlust rain down upon you.”

But, looking at our own day, I wonder if we live in such a time when there is a famine of hearing the words of the LORD, a time when the consequences of our materialism and consumerism are about to rain down upon us because we aren't hearing indeed can't hear our LORD screaming at us about our complicit participation in a very unjust global economic situation. We willingly obey the Law of Supply and Demand but disregard God's Law of justice. Our Creator has built into the ordering of his creation that human beings are supposed to live according to justice, kindness, compassion, sharing with one another all the while enjoying a peaceful relationship with God that spills into our relationships with one another. If someone has too much it should be shared with those who have little. Why does the Christian church in the Western world not hear God's demand upon us to act justly with our wealth and prosperity? Why is it that ministers are afraid to and rarely preach sermons from the prophets that talk about justice? Particularly now when it really does seem that the consequences of our idolatry of wealth and prosperity is about to come raining down upon us. Globally, we've exceeded the limits of this planet's ability to sustain us and our lifestyle. Globally, we are on the verge of a global food crisis. Globally, clean fresh water is becoming a rarity. Globally, natural disasters are increasing in number and severity. Globally, we are warned of a pandemic flu. Globally, the free market economy is one panic attack away from collapsing. The global situation of today doesn't look all that different from the microcosm of Israel in Amos' day. Indeed, we can look at every disastrous thing I just mentioned and

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say that human beings are responsible. They are the consequences of our actions in the pursuit of wealth and prosperity. Yet, in the midst of all this is anybody really hearing the LORD's demand for justice and equity in his creation and saying this means me, I've got to change; we've got to change? Are we in the midst of a famine of hearing the words of the LORD? Amen.