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Amos 8:11-12

WHY WOULD GOD SEND A FAMINE OF THE WORD?

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I don't think that too many of us would view a famine as a good thing. A famine is a shortage, a scarcity of something, most notably food. We've all seen pictures of people affected by a famine in another country. We've seen the pictures of little children with bloated bellies and sunken eyes. Saddest of all is the fact that many people are moved to respond with their gifts of love and the food never gets to the people because of dictators and other evil men seizing it and then selling it on the black market.

Today we are going to speak of another kind of famine, a famine that God would bring about. It is not a famine of food or water, but rather a famine of hearing the Word of the Lord. We see that happens throughout history. We ask WHY WOULD GOD SEND A FAMINE OF THE WORD? We will examine the time of Amos, the time of Luther and our time.

It was a time of great prosperity. It was a time that would rival the reign of David and Solomon. If theirs was the Golden Age, this was the Silver Age. King Jeroboam II had restored the boundaries of Israel. He had defeated their enemies, expanded their territories, and restored national pride. Peace and prosperity reigned. There were many wealthy merchants. One would wonder, "Who could ask for anything more?"

God could. What God wanted is what he always wants: people's hearts. The nation of Israel had forsaken the Lord. It had been that way for some time. This was the Northern Kingdom, the kingdom that had split from Judah. It was the larger of the two. You could characterize the kings as evil and more evil. Not a single one of the kings remained faithful to the Lord. Worship was moved from Jerusalem to Dan and Bethel. Calf worship was instituted there, allegedly representing the Lord. There were new priests, not from the family of Aaron and new festivals to other gods. There was sexual immorality in the name of religion. It was very appealing to the people.

And as the kings led, the people followed. There was widespread crime and injustice. The rich got richer, and the poor got poorer. The courts and judges could be bought. Merchants were dishonest in every possible way. They complained about having to observe religious festivals. They wanted to continue to cheat people.

What a comedown for God's people! They had every advantage. They were the descendants of Abraham. They were chosen to be God's people. God had said to them, "The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession." They had been given many material advantages. They had all the spiritual advantages. They had the worship that pointed to Christ, the Savior of the world. Everything that involved worship pointed to the one who was to come. The daily sacrifices, the Passover, the Day of Atonement, the priesthood, the Temple, the giving of the Law. They were reminded that they were sinners.

Sinful man cannot live in the presence of a just and a holy God. Sin is a barrier. That barrier must be removed. Without the shedding of blood there can be no forgiveness of sins. But all the blood of beasts on all the Jewish altars could not remove our sin forever. We would need a greater one who would come and do that. But these promises of a Savior were no longer important to the people. Money and sexual fulfillment were. God would send his prophets to warn the people. Amos was one of them. He was one man, a shepherd, and a farmer. He had received no formal

training, but God sent him into Israel to preach. And preach he did! God still loved his people in spite of their sin. He still wanted to save them. He still wanted them to repent and trust his promises. And when the king and the religious leaders and the people refused, God would then send a famine of the Word.

The nation of Israel would soon fall to the Assyrians. They would be carried off, never to return. They wanted nothing to do with the Word of God. They rejected God's message and they rejected God's messengers. Amos and others were faithful. They did exactly what God sent them to do, but ultimately some will not listen. God will then withdraw his grace from his people. They have declared that they do not want to be God's people and God finally lets them have their way. Martin Luther said, "The preaching of the gospel is not an eternal, lasting, continual teaching, but it is like a passing shower which travels on. Some ground is watered, and another place stays dry. It does not return and also does not stand still. Then the hot sun comes and licks up the moisture that remains."

Yes, Martin Luther! It is about time to get around to him on this celebration of Reformation Day. Luther lived at a time when there was a famine of the Word. Once again God had sent it because his people were not faithful to him. The Church was very corrupt. Money mattered more than anything else. The Holy Scriptures were not important. Jesus Christ was not seen as the Savior, the Lamb of God who would take away the sin of the world by his innocent suffering and death and his perfect life. He was seen as an angry judge who would send people to hell if they didn't do what the Church told them to do.

The Pope and his people lived in luxury while the rest of the people lived in poverty. And they didn't care. Church offices, including that of Pope, could be bought and sold. Bibles were rare and people reading them were even rarer. More important than Scripture were tradition and the declarations of popes and councils. The clergy were not well-educated. Many priests did not even know the Ten Commandments or the Lord's Prayer. Mary, the mother of our Lord, became the focus of the prayers of the people. And the forgiveness of sins was being bought and sold through pieces of paper known as indulgences.

Martin Luther simply wanted to know the answer to the question. "What do I have to do to get right with God?" It is a question that all of us must answer. Luther, like most people, believed that getting right with God is something that we must accomplish on our own. We must do certain things. We must abstain from doing certain things. We must try hard and give our best and hope that God will accept it. Luther wanted to please God with his works. He became a monk and a priest. He made a pilgrimage to Rome. He went without food and water. He beat his body. But these things drove him to despair. How could he ever know if he had done enough to earn God's favor? The Law accused him, "Be perfect as the Lord, your God, is perfect!"

But Luther would find food during this famine of the Word. He would read and study the Scriptures. Paul's letters to the Romans and Galatians particularly stuck out in teaching that salvation is not something that we can earn. It is a gift of God, given through Christ. We cannot buy the forgiveness of sins if it is God's gift. Luther was excited. He wanted to share this good news with everyone he knew, starting with his fellow clergy. He posted 95 Theses against the sale of indulgences on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg and set everything into motion. Or we should say that God did! The famine was about to end. The people could once again feast on God's precious Word and Sacrament.

It would not be easy. Luther was one man against an empire, but God was with him. God gave him courage. God gave him intelligence. God gave him the words to say as he stood before the Emperor, and said, "Here I stand!" Even though Luther was declared an outlaw, free to be killed by anyone, God preserved his life and enabled Luther to translate the Bible into German, write two catechisms, many hymns and serve as pastor and professor. It was truly remarkable.

The famine of the word was over in Germany. It wasn't without struggle. Both during Luther's life and after, Satan would continue to try to disrupt God's kingdom. The people were willing to study the Word and believe it. Sadly, over the course of time, the Word no longer became important in the lives of the German people. Great cathedrals seating thousands are simply tourist stops today for many people. The Gospel would pass from Germany to America.

And now we look at where we are today. I certainly see a famine of the Word. As a nation we have told God that he is not welcome here. We have murdered over 63 million children in their mothers' wombs, and we call it women's health. We have changed the definition of marriage and celebrated it. We worship the gods of sex and entertainment and self and mammon. And we look for the gospel. Sad to say it is not easy to find. In some places it is impossible to find. I've been to many so-called Christian funerals and weddings. Sadly, there has been no mention of Jesus even at Christmas and Easter. The visit of the Pope was celebrated even by the liberal media. The Pope said many things. I was very disappointed by the fact that there was no mention of salvation by faith in Christ. Without that there is no salvation.

St. Paul's in Saginaw has always been such a wonderful comfort to me throughout my life as I see the visible representation of the gospel in the beautiful art. The two large stained-glass windows tell us everything we need to know. They preach Christ, Christ crucified, and Christ risen. Everything we need for our salvation was taken care of by our Savior. He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification. We must preach Christ. We don't merely preach about Christ. We cannot assume that people know the gospel. The gospel assumed is the gospel denied. Every week our people must know the truths that they are sinners and that they are given forgiveness through Christ. That statue on the altar is a reminder of Christ's love. We see the risen Jesus blessing his people as we see the wounds of love in his hands. Those wounds are real. That was the price he paid for our salvation. His sacrifice was once for all.

The nation of Israel ran out of time. They would not listen to Amos. Since they no longer wanted to listen to God's Word, God would take it away from them and give it to someone else. Germany enjoyed a reformation under Luther and others, but later lost interest and let God take his Word away from them. And America? The clock is certainly ticking. Many church bodies have traded the gospel for doctrines and worship that peoples' itching ears want to hear, but they aren't preaching Christ. God will send a famine of the Word when we decide we no longer want to listen to him. We cannot go along with the crowd. We must preach Christ crucified. We must preach salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, revealed in the Scriptures alone. We cannot worry about numbers. May God give us pastors and laypeople that are faithful and bold! AMEN.