

## **ARE YOU IN A SPIRITUAL FAMINE?**

**Today's Text:** Amos Chap. 8

**Extracts:**

***“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 run to and fro, seeking the word of the Lord, but shall not find it” [Amos 8: 11-12].***

*According to statistics collected for World Vision programmes,<sup>1</sup> over 850 million people worldwide suffer from chronic malnutrition (i.e., insufficient intake of nutrient food) while over one billion people [one-sixth of the world's population] have no access to safe water. According to the World Food Programme, a United Nations specialized agency that computes an annual Global Hunger Index (GHI),<sup>2</sup> one in seven people goes to bed hungry everyday (2007 figures).<sup>3</sup> When there is deficiency of food, it is called a famine.*

*Generally, famine reports dwell mainly or only on food famine, that is, shortage of food for the body. But according to the Scripture, “man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord” [Deut. 8: 3]. Therefore, if we were to add the number of people who are suffering from famine due to deficiency of the word of God (spiritual famine), most of us would be as good as dead! We do not seek God and hardly hear from Him. Yet, we are obese in body and beating our chests that all is well. We donate food and drugs to charity to relieve hunger in the less privileged parts of the world. Who will ‘donate’ to relieve our own spiritual famine?*

*In today's lesson, God told Israel that He was going to send famine to their land, not of food or water “but of hearing the words of the Lord” [Amos 8: 11]. Are you yourself currently experiencing a spiritual famine? What brings it about? How can you avoid or stop it? Can we survive spiritual famine? Those and more are the issues that we shall examine in today's lesson.*

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<sup>1</sup> Facts on hunger, water and HIV and AIDS, <http://www.worldvisionmedia.ca/famine-newsroom/pdfs/Famine-Facts-2007.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> See [www.wfp.org/policies/Introduction](http://www.wfp.org/policies/Introduction)

<sup>3</sup> ‘The Challenge of Hunger 2007,’ [www.ifpri.org/pubs/cp/ghi07.pdf](http://www.ifpri.org/pubs/cp/ghi07.pdf), p. 6.

## 1. Background: Israel faced spiritual famine

In Chapters 1-7 of the book of Amos, God used the prophet to deliver messages in eight prophecies, three sermons and four of five visions to the northern kingdom of Israel. He pointed out to them their past, present and future sins. In Chapter 8 that we are studying this week, God revealed the fifth vision (of the summer fruit) as a pointer to His judgment, namely, “The end has come upon My people Israel; I will not pass by them anymore” [Amos 8: 1-2]. What else was there to talk about? That is what God seemed to be saying to them. They had continued to profane the Sabbath and to use false scales to sell bad wheat. They had sold the poor for silver and the needy for sandals [vv. 4-6]. Their attitude seemed to read like this: “We don’t care even if God speaks to us!”

In response, God pronounced judgment on the people as follows [vv. 11-12]:

*Behold, the days are coming... 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.*

Those are strong words against God’s chosen race. Can you imagine what is there for the rest of us who are actually worse?

## 2. Understanding spiritual famine

From television pictures or direct experience, you may be familiar with the ugly face of hunger that is due to a variety of causes. For example, it could be due to natural causes, such as drought or epidemic or floods or locust invasion. When Joseph was the governor of Egypt, there was famine that lasted for seven years. Money failed. The Egyptians sold their lands and fields to Pharaoh to pay for food. Joseph’s family had to migrate from Canaan to Goshen in Egypt [Gen. 47: 13-27]. You can imagine how many unreported famine deaths there were.

A great deal of hunger in the world today (as all through history) is man-made, such as wars or terrorist attacks. Darfur in the Sudan, the Middle East and Afghanistan are today notable theatres of war.

Nevertheless, hunger that draws world attention is related to the body. Every one is familiar with the tradition of eating three times a day. We call the meals breakfast, lunch and dinner. I do not know who ever mandated ‘three meals a day’ but our body rhythm flows with that food timetable! You skip one of them and your stomach begins to ‘grumble!’ Yet, the body will one day perish. But do you have a menu for your spirit body, the soul that will last forever? So, if skipping meals for a few days can lead to hunger that is dangerous to the body, can you imagine the state of your soul that has been starved for years? Clearly, spiritual famine is a matter that deserves urgent action!

Hunger also assumes that people want to eat but there is no food for them. What if there is food but people are not keen on eating? After all, dissidents do go on hunger strike to dramatize their cause! With reference to ‘spiritual food,’ the word of God is the food for the spirit [**Jn 6: 63; Ezek. 3: 1; Rev. 10: 10**]. We may or may not have the appetite to eat it, even when it is available. On the other hand, God can choose to withhold it from us even when we are keen to devour it. Therefore, we need to analyse more closely the issue of spiritual famine so that we can better appreciate today’s Bible text from the book of Amos.

We can easily find ourselves in any of the following situations:

a) *We do not hear from God and we don’t care!*

There are some people who do not hide their disdain for the word of God. Some profess to be atheists. Many are backslidden Christians who have been drawn away by the distractions of their calling or profession. For example, after God had stripped King Saul of the throne of Israel that was then given to David, he really did not care any longer about the word of God. He spent the most part of the rest of his life pursuing David to kill him. Especially after the death of Samuel, the prophet through whom God had spoken to the king, Saul “put out the mediums and spiritists out of the land” [**1 Sam. 28: 1-3**]. However, such people betray their ‘faith’ when they face uncertainty. When the Philistines mounted a huge army close to Israel and without prophets to consult, Saul ran to the witch of Endor for spiritual guidance [**vv. 5-8**]!

This case is the worst form of spiritual famine. You can do only one of two things: *emigrate or die!* You emigrate from sin to safety when you repent. You die when you remain in sin. That was the situation that Israel faced in the time of the prophet Amos.

b) *We have easy access to God’s word but we are not keen*

If we have food in abundance but refuse to eat, it could be because we are fasting. In that case, we are refusing food for a spiritual purpose. But if we have appetite but refuse to eat, perhaps, initially for dieting purposes, it could degenerate into a condition called *anorexia nervosa*,<sup>4</sup> an eating disorder due to an obsessive fear of weight gain. There is a spiritual equivalent which can take the following forms:

- Some people do not want to hear the word of God if doing so will challenge them to give up pleasures or temporary advantages. For example, after hearing Paul’s sermon about Jesus, King Agrippa said to him, “You almost persuaded me to become a Christian!” [**Acts 26:**

<sup>4</sup> For more on the disorder, you may read Melissa Conrad Stoppler, MD, ‘Anorexia Nervosa,’ [http://www.medicinenet.com/anorexia\\_nervosa/article.htm](http://www.medicinenet.com/anorexia_nervosa/article.htm)

**24-28]**. He could not give up his throne. Whether we like it or not, sin (such as sexual promiscuity) is enjoyment to some of us and we may not be keen to give it up. An abortion advocate may still go to church but may not pay attention to the sermons against killing innocent babies.

- In this group are those that pay attention to the rituals of worship but not the essence. For example, when they fast, it shows on their faces so as to get approval of piety from other people [**Matt. 6: 16-18**]. Some people may give the impression to the public that they are God-fearing but privately they do the direct opposite. These are the hypocrites that Jesus has condemned in harsh words. They honour God with their lips but their hearts are far away from Him [**Matt. 15: 1-9**].

Many believers are mere *ritualists*. They do give a public impression of being God-fearing. They go to church religiously and perform all the rituals required of their congregation. But when you scratch a little beyond the surface, the hypocrisy shows. Honestly, they are starving because the word of God is not in them. They are suffering from *spiritual anorexia*!

c) *We are keen to hear God's word but we are denied access*

We may be desirous to know the word of God and follow it but we are constrained by circumstances. Here are some examples:

- You may find yourself in a place where by law or tradition you are denied access to the word of God. For example, foreign Christian workers in Saudi Arabia, an Islamic country, are hardly allowed to come in with their Bibles nor can they build churches. Moslems in Islamic states face threat to their lives to convert to other religions, no matter how keen they may be. Persecution can take a subtle form such as, for example, when a believer in public office acts on the basis of law which is against the law of God.
- Some people are so deeply involved in material pursuits to the detriment of their relationship with God. In the Parable of the Sower, Jesus talked about some people who have gladly received the word of God but the cares of this world choke it out of them and could therefore not take roots [**Lk 8: 14**].
- Some men and women of God will admit that they may get too involved in “the success” of their ministries that they no longer have time to worship God. Invariably, the power of God goes down unless they return to close fellowship with Him. It is instructive that Jesus always withdrew from the multitudes into the wilderness alone to pray [**Lk 5: 16; Matt. 14: 23**].

Spiritual hunger in this setting cannot be satisfied because it is *imprisoned*! You may seek to be discharged from such a jail by redefining your priorities

in life, namely, to seek first God's kingdom and His righteousness to which you can add earthly pursuits [**Matt. 6: 33**].

d) *We are keen to hear the word of God and He makes it accessible to guide us*

As we noted earlier, we do not live by bread alone (food for the body) but by the word of God (food for the spirit). Therefore, a balanced meal of food and the word of God should be our breakfast, lunch and dinner. Believers walk by faith and not by sight [**2 Cor. 5: 7**]. The word of God even lists the foods that are good for the body [**Lev. 11**]. It follows that, if our life choices are God-led, we shall get the best results in this world and in the world to come. A few examples from the Scripture will make this quite vivid:

- During their 40-year wandering in the wilderness, God fed the over two million people of Israel with manna from heaven. The disobedient generation died in the wilderness but their innocent descendants survived on bread from heaven [**Num. 26: 64-65**].
- During the three-and-a-half-year long drought during the reign of king Ahab of Israel, God sent ravens to deliver bread and meat twice a day to the prophet Elijah in the wilderness [**1 Kgs 17: 1-6**]. When the brook (from which the prophet drank water) dried up, the Lord sent him to a widow in Zarapeth who miraculously fed him from a bin of flour that was never used up and a jar of oil that never dried up [**vv. 8-16**]!
- When the prophet Elijah was running away from Jezebel whose false prophets Elijah had killed, God sent an angel to serve him cake and water “and he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights as far as Horeb the mountain of God” [**1 Kgs 19: 1-8**].
- As Paul was being taken prisoner to Rome, the ship on which he was traveling ran into a tempest. Members of the ship's crew were so scared that they went without food for two weeks. One morning, Paul came to encourage them to eat because the night before, God had sent His angel to assure him that all the lives on the ship would be saved. When they saw the man of God eating joyfully, they were encouraged and they joined him! True to the word of God, the ship was lost but everyone on board survived [**Acts 27: 13-44**].

Clearly, if we are keen to love God with all our hearts, souls and strength [**Deut. 6: 5**], and heed His word at all times, He will make our ways prosperous [**Josh. 1: 8**], and we shall be like the tree “planted by the rivers of water, that brings forth its fruit in its season, whose leaf also shall not wither” [**Ps. 1: 3**]. We become *spiritually nourished*.

### **3. Conclusion: Give us this day our daily bread!**

Some elders of Israel once came to the prophet Ezekiel to hear from the Lord. God said, “Son of man, these men have set up their idols in their hearts, and put before them that which causes them to stumble into iniquity. *Should I let Myself be inquired at all by them ... The Lord will answer him who comes according to the multitude of his idols. ...* Therefore, say to the house of Israel ... ‘Repent, turn away from your idols, and turn away your eyes from all your abominations’” [Ezek. 14: 1-6]. Jesus told the multitudes that followed after His miracles, “Why do you call Me Lord, Lord, and not do the things which I say?” [Lk 6: 46]. Jesus adds that His mother and brothers and sisters are those who do His Father’s will [Mk 3: 31-35], and that those who deny Him before men He will deny before His Father in heaven [Matt. 10: 23].

Try to test your spiritual ‘résumé’ against the profiles of spiritual famine covered in today’s study. For example, do you choose Sunday to sleep at home (after six hectic days at work) instead of going to church to thank and worship God? Do you cheat on your family members or office colleagues or business partners? Do you cheat on your taxes and tithes? Do you have time to study the word of God in the Bible, and strive to obey His word therein? Are you really keen on a close relationship with God and His Christ?

In the Lord’s Prayer, Christ taught us, “Give us this day our daily bread” [Matt. 6: 11]. Make that bread a balanced diet of your local bread and the word of God. That is the surest way to beat spiritual famine.