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## AMOS 8:11-14 : THE WORST FAMINE

*No. EE2*

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**W**e have all seen heartrending photos of people suffering in famine. One can hardly imagine a more horrible fate - to die slowly of hunger, to see children wither to skin and bone, and to have to bury loved ones every second day.

Famine is terrible! But a shortage of food is not the worst kind of deprivation. Amos here writes about a more severe need - the need for the Word of God. It doesn't always feel as urgent; on the contrary, it is actually scarcely noticeable. What, then, makes it so critical? The effects thereof, and the long-term consequences - not just for yourself, but for your children and your children's children. And only the merciful intervention of the Lord, a Spirit-driven revival, can rectify this.

### THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND IN BRIEF

It is during the time following the division of the nation after Solomon's death. Amos was a farmer at Tekoa, about 10 km south of Bethlehem in the southern kingdom of Judah. From there he was sent, approximately seven and a half centuries before Christ, to the northern kingdom of ten tribes - called Israel - to prophesy against their sins.

In our text we read that he talks about a spiritual famine awaiting Israel on account of their sin. That is, if they do not repent.

### A WARNING

☐ Amos is not describing the current situation.

"Behold, the days are coming", he says (11). It's a warning.

Biblical prophecies of the future aren't aimed at satisfying idle curiosity; it tells of the future so that people can live in the light of that knowledge. The nature of biblical prophecy is always moral.

In fact, a person's beliefs concerning the future effect their current sense of morality directly. Without the anticipation of the future, and the ensuing sense of accountability, morality disappears. If you do not have to account for your life one impending day, and if you do not believe that your current life will influence your future, why would it matter how you behave yourself now?

That is why Paul says in 1Cor 15:32 that, if there is to be no resurrection from the dead, we might as well eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow, or the day after, we die (Isa 22:13).

### THE FAMINE (11-12)

☐ The Lord had sent famine in judgement before (4:6-8), but the people did not heed Him. Now He will send a much worse famine: the people will not be without food; they will lose the truth. They will no longer find the words of the Lord (11-12).

☐ In their search for the Word of God, the people will "stagger from sea to sea" and "wander from north to east, searching for the word of the Lord" (12, NIV). They will be without direction, uncertain, perplexed, without wisdom or insight.

The Dead Sea and the Sea of Galilee lie to the East and the Mediterranean Sea to the West. Then they will be searching in the North - and then again in the East by the sea. The South is not mentioned. Why not? That is where the temple lies, and God's truth. The obstinacy and pride of the northern kingdom will prevent them from seeking the Lord and His Word in the south - in Jerusalem!

What picture is Amos sketching here? The headstrong, stubborn blindness of man without the Word of God. Yes, they will look everywhere - but

by no means in Jerusalem, where God and His revelation is found. They will try anything, except to search through the Word and submitting to what is found there.

Observe that these people are still very religious. And they are still searching - even frantically. But they are choosy; they do not long for genuine truth, and thus they cannot find it.

### MAN-MADE RELIGION (14)

☐ If you seek but do not find, you will begin to conjure up your own pretenses in order to satisfy your hunger.

Three things are practised in Israel: the mixing of religions (syncretism); distorting and abusing religion; and superstition and idolatry.

Note that these things are in consequence to God's people losing the truth. Because they refuse to seek it, their misery increases. And so their spiritual deprivation intensifies. It becomes darker. Hopelessness takes over. And the more blind they become, the less they grasp of the truth. It is a vicious cycle!

- *Syncretism*. They "swear by the shame of Samaria" (14, NIV). Probably Amos says that the worship of Ashima has become part of Israel's religion (2 Kings 17:30). The Hebrew word for "shame" has exactly the same consonants as the name of this idol (classical Hebrew did not have vowels). It can therefore also be translated as: they "swear by Ashima of Samaria" (see footnote in NIV).

Religious syncretism is to pick out a portion from an array of religions each, and making a new concoction with them. Israel still claimed to worship Jahweh, but also dragged in a number of idols.

God, however, is holy and jealous. Whoever wishes to worship Him, must worship Him alone. He will never yield in this.

- *The distortion and abuse of religion*. They say: "As surely as your god lives, o Dan!" (14).

According to 1Kings 12:26-29 Jerobeam, king of Israel, set up calves of gold at Bethel and Dan - to prevent the people from going to worship in Jerusalem, in the southern kingdom. Jerobeam was obviously frightened that the people would be attracted to Judah again - and so religion was used to serve political purposes. God is used as a means to an end. It is the distortion of worship for personal gain. The Word is clear, however: you serve God for who and what He is - as He revealed Himself to us - or you leave it completely. God will not allow Himself to be misused for human or worldly gain!

- *Superstition and idolatry.* They swear: "As the Way of Beersheba lives!" (14, ESV).

Beersheba was one of the places of worship in Israel. The journey there was long, expensive, and filled with hardship. Apparently they saw in this some kind of religious merit. Moreover, there were probably a number of high places of sacrifice along the way (2Kings 23:8).

And now they go even further. They swear by this road. An almost divine power is attributed to it. What else is this but idolatry and superstition?

### THE YOUTH ARE THE VICTIMS (13)

□ It is unclear from the original text whether the young people are guilty of the faults described in v.14, or whether v.13 is simply a statement concerning the youth while v.14 concerns the people as a whole. The last-mentioned is probably correct.

Whichever it may be, it remains true that it is the youth that is struck hardest by general religious apostasy. It is them, more than anybody, that "faint because of thirst" (13). Therefore, when God gives up society to its sin (Rom 1:24, 26, 28), when He withdraws His mercy from a community, it is most clearly visible in the youth.

There are many reasons for this. On one hand many young people follow their parents blindly. On the other, they are searching for authenticity and reality. Moreover, they are eager to experiment with

new things. This makes them vulnerable to deception. Because they are inexperienced, naïve and unwise, they have little discernment and fall easily for any new gimmick - even in the church.

However, religious degeneration is always linked in some way to the faithlessness of previous generations - without, of course, absolving the young generation of their guilt. And if the Lord does not intervene, this results in a vicious cycle. It degenerates from bad to worse. After all, these youths were the parents and grandparents of those who suffered the Assirian exile.

You and I have an enormous responsibility towards our descendants! The church that must lead our children and grandchildren on the road to salvation is being formed today!

### TO CONCLUDE

□ How does God bring about a hunger for truth? History teaches that He uses many means.

- *Sometimes the Bible is simply taken away.* Sometimes the language of a people gradually undergoes a change, without new translations being made. This happened during the middle ages. The simple people had to struggle with the Latin Vulgate - a language that previous generations could speak well, but which slowly died away. One of the fruits of the sixteenth-century Reformation was the new Bible translations cropping up everywhere.

At other times repressive governments prohibited the printing, distribution and even ownership of a Bible. Twentieth-century communism was especially guilty in this regard.

- *Sometimes theology steals the Bible from the people.* The authority and reliability of the Bible is constantly being eroded by unbelieving theologians who have a hankering for saying something new. This undermines the faith of many. And in time it causes terrible ignorance, confusion, and scepticism. Once that happens, you can have a

bookcase filled with Bibles and still expire from spiritual starvation.

- *When the Lord gives a people over to their sin, one of the means He uses, is to stop giving preachers of Biblical truth.* What is described in Eph 4:8-16 simply stops happening. And without continued preaching - Word-based, God-centred and Christ-focussed preaching - nothing remains of the true church.

- *People lose their appetite for real truth.* Note that they continue searching, but they will embrace just about anything. But like Israel of old, they will refuse to venture close to "Jerusalem" - where true truth alone can be found.

□ Consider our current situation. Many people are still very religious. But just about anything is acceptable - except Jesus Christ, the only answer, the way, the truth and the life.

□ *You, are you a faithful and frequent visitor to "Jerusalem"?*

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