



FIVE FAMINES

HOW GOD USES TOUGH TIMES
FOR HIS PURPOSES



An excerpt from the book "The Flow", - living and working in God's economy!



FIVE FAMINES

There are about 14 famines described in the Bible. Space does not allow me to describe all of these economic disasters, which caused severe problems for the people. Let me just describe a few, from which we can learn some lessons. Famine is like a recession or depression and causes great suffering. What does God want to teach his people through these hard times?

Famine throughout the Middle East

Genesis 47 tells of probably the most widespread recorded famine.

Joseph had a dream and foretold 7 very bad years. We read that their money was all gone¹. Clearly, people were not prepared for hard times. Then we read that they had to sell their livestock in exchange to buy grain for bread². They were forced to sell valuable assets, probably for severely discounted prices.

Then, the situation got so bad, that they were forced to sell their land for food, thereby destroying their future³.

Finally, they were so desperate after selling all their livestock and land, they got to the point of realisation that all they had left were

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1. Genesis 47:15
 2. Genesis 47:16
 3. Genesis 47:19

their bodies. They asked Pharaoh to take them into slavery⁴.

Joseph taxed the grain which was given to the people at 20% but the people lost their land and became slaves to the system.

Bad times will come. We must learn to save for the future. Joseph's example of saving 20% turned out to be the very way in which the people could survive. He had sufficient seed to be able to distribute. Joseph was a good steward.

Fleeing from Famine

Ruth 1:1 tells us a famine caused a husband and wife to leave Bethlehem and go to Moab. The move to Moab seems to help the family and Elimelech, Naomi, Mahlon, Kilion, Orpha, and they were quite happy in Moab. However, disaster struck again some years later. First Elimelech died and then his two sons, leaving the women in a desperate situation. In the society of that time, death of supporting male family members greatly impacted the women, economically. The situation seemed hopeless and they concluded, "the hand of the Lord has gone out against us⁵." They suffered again from lack of food.

Naomi leaves Moab hoping to find food in Bethlehem where she had heard that the famine was over. The town was excited at seeing them again, but Naomi said, "Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made life very bitter for me⁶. Why call me Naomi when the Lord has caused me to suffer and the Almighty has sent such tragedy upon me?" She went on to say, "God has brought me home." She sees all of these unfortunate events of famine and death as somehow a work of the Lord.

The story has a happy ending. Daughter Ruth meets Boaz and they get married. They have a son and name him Obed. Obed is the

4. Genesis 47:19

5. Ruth 1:13

6. Ruth 1:21

father of Jessie who is the father of David, and these are mentioned in the genealogy of Jesus Christ⁷.

We see that God was using these economic conditions to physically move people to the locations they needed to be and to meet people they needed to meet.

God uses economic difficulties to prepare people for His glory. Those situations are painful, but, in all things we see that God uses the waste products of life to make something beautiful! God is in the re-cycling business!

Drought in Samaria

The third famine is described in 1 Kings 18. It lasted three and a half years, and the people suffered great under the wicked leaders, Ahab and Jezebel. When rain stops in that part of the world, the economy stops. God had a faithful steward in Obadiah, who was able to feed a hundred of Gods prophets. Impressed, Ahab told Obadiah to go and look elsewhere for grass to feed the horses and mules, because the livestock was about to die. This became so critical that Ahab did not want to lose his assets.

Obadiah found Elisha. Elisha went to Ahab and told him that the famine would not end because Ahab was following the prophets of Baal. The struggle culminated in Mount Carmel at the big test between Elisha and the prophets of Baal.

Fire came when Elisha called out to God, and Elisha was able to tell Ahab that the rains would come. God used this economic pain to turn the hearts of the people back to God - and they acknowledged God to be in control of rain, fire and economy - not the powerful Ahab, Jezebel or Baal.

7. Matthew 1:5

A terrible famine

We can read this awful famine, together with a war in 2 Kings 6 to 8. Terrible times in a combination of disasters.

The king of Syria gathered his army and besieged Samaria and people starved⁸. This siege lasted so long, that famine ensued. People were so desperate for food that they were buying a donkeys head at an enormous price of 80 shekels of silver, almost a kilogram, equivalent today to about \$650. They were buying a quarter of a seed pod for five shekels of silver. Birds passed these seed pods after they ate them⁹. Talk about hyperinflation!

This famine became so bad that they started to eat one another. We read of a woman who cried out for help, because others wanted to kill and eat her babies. ¹⁰ In this time of war, people could not even surrender because they would be killed. The besieged king was at his wit's end and was desperate to get out of the mess. He could not solve the problem.

He needed to look to God, who was using economic pain to help them realise that God controls the economy. Elisha passed on God's promise. "At this time tomorrow, at the gates of the city, about 20 kilos of fine flour will sell for a shekel - about \$ 10 in today's money. God told them the exact time, the exact commodity, at the exact place. No-one knew what the price of commodities would be ... but the man of God did.

A senior officer stood next to the king. He said, "If the Lord himself should make windows in heaven, how could this thing be?" He could just not believe that God could do something like that! They were in the middle of war and hyper-inflation! Elisha looked at him and replied, "You shall see it with your own eyes, but you shall not

8. 2 Kings 6:24

9. 2 Kings 6:25

10. 2 Kings 6:29

eat of it¹¹.” Elisha was bold confident because he knew God. He ended self-reliance. It is not up to us!

Everything came out as predicted and actually happened the next day by a miracle of God¹². The captain was trampled at the gate. Who do we trust rational man or the man of God?

Universal famine in the 1st century AD

The early, emerging church was confronted with a widespread famine. During the reign of Claudius Caesar, several different famines are known to have occurred. In the fourth year of his office, 45 A.D., a famine was particularly severe in Judea and described by Luke¹³, and lasted about three years. Josephus, the Jewish historian, supplied further information concerning the intensity of this famine, with its great distress and many deaths.

The famine served as an occasion for many of the New Testament congregations to co-operate in the giving of material aid to the fellow believers who lived in Judea.

Just before this famine, prophets had journeyed from Jerusalem to Antioch, and one by the name of Agabus, inspired by the Holy Spirit, proclaimed that there would be “great lack throughout all the world,” and then Luke says, “this came to pass in the days of Claudius Caesar.”

The next verse informs us that the disciples in Antioch, were determined to send relief to the believers in Judea. Each man, according to his ability would make a donation, which, in turn, was sent to the “elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul¹⁴.”

The disciples started to care for one another. Suffering produced

11. 2 Kings 7:2

12. 2 Kings 7:16

13. Acts 11:28

14. Acts 11:30

unity. Suffering divides the world but can unify the Body of Christ through their support. In economic disasters, the world will be full of fear and people will panic. We will deliver hope. The famine was, in fact, perfectly timed to bring the Church together, to invest in each other, and to see how God delivers His solutions through His people.

Throughout the famines, God wanted people to learn lessons and trust in Him for the outcome. When facing troubling economic times, take heart! His promises remain true and solid. “Behold, the eye of the Lord is on those who fear him, on those who hope in his steadfast love, that he may deliver their soul from death and keep them alive in famine¹⁵.”

“The Lord knows the days of the blameless, and their heritage will remain forever; they are not put to shame in evil times; in the days of famine they have abundance¹⁶.”

15. Psalm 33:18,19

16. Psalm 37:19

17. James 5:1-3