

A Famine for Hearing

by David Orton

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“Behold the days are coming,” declares the Lord GOD, “when 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.”

Amos 8:11

Is it possible to attend church week by week, listen to sermons, engage in all the activities of church life, perhaps even read this article, but never really hear the voice of God? Absolutely! Our membership in a church movement or group does not guarantee that we will hear what the Holy Spirit is saying to us personally, or to our generation.

Amos prophesied of a day when God would “*send a famine in the land*”, but “*not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD*” (Amos 8:11). He spoke to Israel during a time of great growth and prosperity. Like the Western church, the people of God had been lulled into a false sense of security, trusting in their material strength while they continued to worship the Lord. They celebrated their feasts, gathered in their assemblies, and gave their offerings, but the heart of God was grieved. In fact he declared to them, “*I hate, I despise your feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies. Even though you bring me burnt offerings...I will not accept them...I will have no regard for them.*” (5:21,22). Their worship, to him, was an affront. Like us, they made music and delighted in the sound of their songs, they celebrated in their services and great assemblies, but the Lord only responded, “*Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps.*” (v 23) Why was this? Was God being arbitrary? Or was there a real grievance surfacing from the violation of his holy nature? If so, what was the issue? Very simply, Israel had rejected the law and, therefore, the Lord himself. Amos, true to the prophetic oracle, called the people back from their worship of other gods to the touchstone of the covenant—the law-word of God. He saw that while maintaining an external expression of worship they had, in fact, “*rejected the law*” and had been “*led astray by false gods*” (2:4).

The cry of a passionate God for holiness & intimacy

But what was the significance of rejecting the law-word? At its heart the law was a covenant-bond between a lover and the beloved. This is seen in what is called the *shema* of Deuteronomy chapter 6 verse 4: “*Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your strength.*” The white-hot core of the covenant was the cry of a passionate God for intimacy with his people. It called for their total and exclusive devotion. Therefore, the heart of God, as represented by the prophets, was revealed as the heart of an aggrieved lover. And so the prophetic oracle even in our day – the new covenant era – will consistently call us, as God’s people, back to the heart of love and obedience to his law-word. But are we hearing that call? It is significant that the *shema*, encapsulating the heart of the covenant relationship, was so-called after the first word of Deuteronomy chapter 6 verse 4—the Hebrew word for ‘hear’. We have already mentioned that Amos spoke of a “*famine, not of bread, but of ‘hearing’ the word of the Lord*” (8:11). This is exactly the same word – *shema* – as in Deuteronomy. So, the famine was for ‘hearing’ God’s call back to holiness and intimacy—back to a passionate love relationship with him.

False gods

But, here was the rub. A love relationship with the Lord required the giving up other ‘lovers’; that is, forsaking the false gods of the surrounding nations. What were those gods? And what was the dominant one? Soon after entering the land Israel had taken on-board the supreme Canaanite deity, Baal, and bowed to his promise of fecundity—of fruitful crops and wombs. Represented in the worship of a bull –the symbol of power and virility – Baal had become, in their minds at least, their prime source of productivity and power. He had given them their security and sense of ease in unusually prosperous times. But in reality, the superior leadership skills of Jeroboam II in Israel and Uzziah in Judah, had expanded their borders and increased their wealth.

Human skill, strength, and leadership had become their actual saviours.

The idolatry of the contemporary church

The parallels with the early 21st Century church are all too obvious. We too have bowed to the Baals of productivity and power as we pursue the latest formulas of church growth. Driven by the tyranny of success we have sought to grow the largest churches and the most influential ministries. Pastors and people alike are caught on the treadmill of activity to produce bigger and better. We too through human programming and strength of leadership are looking to expand our territory, to increase our size. And like Amos's generation when we reach a measure of success we become secure and self-satisfied. We then consume energy and resource in the maintenance and preservation of the *status quo*. But the prophetic word speaks into our condition by declaring:

1 “Woe to those who are at ease in Zion, and to those who feel secure on the mountain of Samaria, the notable men of the first of the nations, to whom the house of Israel comes!

2 Pass over to Calneh, and see, and from there go to Hamath the great; then go down to Gath of the Philistines. Are you better than these kingdoms? Or is their territory greater than your territory,

3 O you who put far away the day of disaster and bring near the seat of violence?

4 “Woe to those who lie on beds of ivory and stretch themselves out on their couches, and eat lambs from the flock and calves from the midst of the stall,

5 who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp and like David invent for themselves instruments of music,

6 who drink wine in bowls and anoint themselves with the finest oils but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph!

Amos 6:1–6 ESV

We must ask ourselves some hard questions. What are we moved by? Are we more motivated by ministry growth, the latest in contemporary worship, or bigger and better plant and equipment – than by the *“the ruin of Joseph”* — the true spiritual condition of church and culture?

Keeping the main thing the main thing

Someone has said, *“The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing”*. But tragically we have been distracted and made everything else the “main thing”. We have looked to music, or leadership excellence, or a building program, or perhaps the latest techniques and methods of growing our church and ministry as the “main thing”. If at the end of the day, having done all the conferences, read all the books, and tried all the formulas we're no closer to Jesus we need to be asking ourselves what it's all about. We need to be asking, *“God, what really is the ‘main thing’?”*

When Jesus came he provided the answer. He exclusively reinforced, in no uncertain terms, the *shema* as the “main thing”. Ruthlessly, but with a deep pathos, he narrowed down the purpose of our existence to only one non-negotiable thing. Asked as to which was the greatest commandment he responded by quoting from Deuteronomy chapter 6 verse 4:

37 And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. 38 This is the great and first commandment. 39 And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. 40 On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”

28 And one of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, asked him, “Which commandment is the most important of all?” 29 Jesus answered, “The most important is, ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. 30 And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ 31 The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”

Matthew 22:37–40; Mark 12:28–31 ESV

God's nature, nor purpose, was changed with the transition from the old to the new covenant. From the failure of our first parents through to the chronic backslidings of Israel and to the contemporary church the heart and purpose of God remain. The eternal purpose of God expressed through all the law and the prophets is summed up and fulfilled in this one thing: to love the Lord with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. The “main thing” is therefore only discovered in our response to Jesus, the *Great Heart* — to pure, passionate love.

Understanding God's judgements

But because God is the Lord, and his love is holy, there are consequences. When we respond to his love in humility and openness we experience the positive reinforcement of his presence and pleasure with an increase of blessing. But if we spurn or ignore his tender ministrations we ultimately invite his chastisements, his disciplines, until we return to him. For individuals, families, churches, and even nations either the blessings or the curses of the covenant (Deut 28 & Lev 26) are released according to our handling of the *Great Commandment*—as to whether or not we “love the Lord with all our heart, soul, and mind”. Our response either releases the kingdom in blessing or in judgement. But to receive this word we must resolve any confusion we have about the character of God and his judgements. As our heavenly Father he is full of love and compassion, he is slow to anger, delighting over us and desiring our good. But he is also just and we are, therefore, exhorted to “Behold, his goodness and severity” (Rom 11:22). We see this most clearly in the cross as the consummate *severe mercy*—a demonstration of mercy and truth having kissed (Ps 85:10). In it God's mercy and judgement are reconciled—judgement on sin in Christ's vicarious death and, because of it, mercy toward man. As with the cross the goodness of God is sometimes expressed through his severity. When we repeatedly refuse to respond to the *tender mercies* of his love in the blessings of the covenant he will send *severe mercies* in the curses of the covenant, until he has our attention and we return to him. Quite simply, God's love is tough.

Distinguishing two kinds of judgement

This is where we must distinguish between two kinds of judgement: *eschatological* and *remedial*. The former refers to the final and eternal judgements – rewards and destinies – while the latter to the chastisements of a loving Father, which are designed to restore his children to himself. They are sent from the hand of a tender-loving God to set us free from the idolatry of self and the deceptiveness of sin so that we might share in his own holy nature (Heb 12:7-10). The curses of the covenant (Deut 28 & Lev 26) are of this second kind—remedial. If we do not hear the voice of God through his goodness, perhaps we'll hear it through his severity. This has been the history and experience of Israel from the days of the judges, through the kings, and their various captivities and diasporas to this present day. Israel still remains under God's remedial discipline as does, in my view, the Western church. We have been warned concerning Israel's experience:

Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come. Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall.

1 Corinthians 10:11–12 ESV

Tragically, like Israel, we have already fallen and are experiencing the discipline of God.

Hearing God through September 11, 2001

These lines were initially written soon after the Islamic terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 on New York and Washington, claiming 3,000 lives. But have we heard the Lord through these attacks? If so, what is he saying and have we responded to him? Or, have we been too occupied with the very real and necessary process of comforting and grieving, and perhaps, through a miss-guided patriotism, even explaining away these horrific attacks as merely a Satanic attack on America.

If God's purpose and nature have not changed between covenants and, if the *shema*, through the *Great Commandment* remains as the “main thing”, it will provide the touchstone to understand God's dealings with us, the grid through which we can interpret what otherwise could seem to be arbitrary and meaningless events. Through the lens of God's covenant-love – of the *Great Commandment* – we can now begin to recognise the hand of a loving, but just God in natural disasters, in economic

recessions and in wars (see Deut 28 & Lev 26). Not that God is the author of evil, but as the sovereign creator-God he will cause the wrath of man to praise him (Ps 76:10). He will use Cyrus as his anointed (Isa 45:1). Pagan kings, religions, and ideologies, including nature itself will all be used to fulfil his good purpose. Through these things a loving Father will bring to bear his rod of discipline to restore his children. But if they do not hear his voice through the disciplines they will only increase in severity. The law and the prophets, and especially Israel's history, teach and demonstrate that the remedial judgements of God become incremental if his people do not listen and turn. In my view the Western church and culture are in this process right now, and have been for at least the last 100 years. From the sinking of the Titanic, through two catastrophic World Wars, a major depression, to the more recently shifting climate and weather patterns, various economic recessions, and now a fresh radical Islamic insurgence, God is after our attention. He is speaking to us, but on the whole, the Western church and culture is not listening. He is calling to us from a heart of pure love; nevertheless we continue headlong in our pursuit of other gods. This is not to say there are not tremendously encouraging signs—there are. The world-wide Holy Spirit renewal of the last 60 years, including the intercessory prayer movement reflected in countless global, national, and regional prayer initiatives crossing all denominational boundaries, the massive harvest in developing nations, and an embryonic interest by some in the city-wide church and organic church are all signs that there is a mighty subterranean shift coming, that God is at work bringing the church back to himself. But there is a prophetic urgency. There is an acceleration and intensification of both the blessing and the judgement of God. The hour is far later than we have thought. And now is the time to cast our idols to the ground – to have done with our false theologies and values – to humble ourselves and pray.

A God who relents

The good news is that if we turn to the Lord in wholesale repentance and brokenness he will roll back the remedial judgements that are most certainly coming our way. The Lord declared through Jeremiah,

7 If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, 8 and if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I intended to do to it. 9 And if at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, 10 and if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will relent of the good that I had intended to do to it.

Jeremiah 18:7–10 ESV

But the opposite is also true, that if as a church and a culture we do not hear his voice and turn, he will also relent of the good that he has spoken over us. God is compassionate and slow to anger and, therefore, it is in his nature to relent when we turn to him:

13 And rend your hearts and not your garments. Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster. 14 Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him, a grain offering and a drink offering for the LORD your God?

Joel 2:13–14 ESV

"Take heed how you hear"

Therefore, let us take heed how we hear. Jesus warned the disciples to be careful about their hearing: *"For nothing is secret that will not be revealed, nor anything hidden that will not be known and come to light. Therefore take heed how you hear. For whoever has, to him more will be given; and whoever does not have, even what he seems to have will be taken from him."* (Lk. 8:17-18). How we hear will ultimately be brought to light. The words that Jesus speaks are spirit and life, but if our hearts are hardened all we hear are physical words—sounds waves hitting our eardrums, but not hitting our spirit. In the anatomy of the spiritual life our hearing is always connected to our heart. The only reason we sit in church week by week hearing sermon after sermon and remain unchanged is that our hearts have become hardened:

13 This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. 14 Indeed, in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says: "You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive." 15 For this people's heart has grown dull, and with their ears

they can barely hear, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them.’

Matthew 13:13–15 ESV

There is a sound being heard by this generation, but are we listening? Are we only hearing words—the words of a man, of a preacher or writer, but never hearing the voice of God. As Amos prophesied, there would be a “famine for hearing”. Therefore, let us humble ourselves, so that we may hear the voice of the Spirit and the bride saying, ‘*Come*’. (Rev 22:17).

Now is the time to turn from the idols of the heart – from our comfort zones of personal significance and success – to the Lord. Father, help us to hear the cry of your heart for us. May it break us and turn us again to you.

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