

1 Samuel 3:1-4:1a

'On famines and fullness'

Drought and Famine

The disaster of famine

I want to begin tonight's talk by talking to you about famine.

A famine is an acute or general shortage of primary foods.

One of the great documented instances of famine is the Great Irish famine of 1844.

It began when disease struck the potato crops.

Before long acre upon acre of Irish farmland was covered with black rot caused by blight.

Harvests failed.

Food prices soared.

The subsistence farmers in Ireland could no longer pay rent to their landlords.

Those who ate the rotten potatoes became sick and entire villages were consumed with cholera and typhus.

People started dying in droves.

Landlords evicted hundreds of thousands of peasants.

The poor and the dying then crowded into disease-infested workhouses.

Other landlords paid for their tenants to emigrate, sending hundreds of thousands of Irish to America and other English-speaking countries.

But even emigration was no panacea – ship owners crowded hundreds of desperate Irish onto rickety vessels labeled "coffin ships."

And in many cases, these ships reached port only after losing a third of their passengers to disease, hunger and other causes.

As many as one million men, women, and children died in the Irish Famine of 1846-1850.

It was an event that changed the social and cultural structure of Ireland in profound ways.

Famines are terrible events.

They affect the very core of human existence – then need for sustenance and food and water and health.

Spiritual famines

And I think that this is why God uses the analogy of famine at various times in the Bible.

You see, at various times in the Bible, God talks about spiritual famines.

The most famous example is Amos 8:11-14.

Let me read it to you:

¹¹ *"The days are coming," declares the Sovereign LORD, "when I will send a famine through the land — not a famine of food or a thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the words of the LORD.*

¹² *Men will stagger from sea to sea and wander from north to east, searching for the word of the LORD, but they will not find it.*

¹³ *"In that day "the lovely young women and strong young men will faint because of thirst.*

[Amos 8:11-13 - NIV]

Well, the language is different, but the situation is similar in 1 Samuel 3.

For as we open 1 Samuel 3 we are told that there is a famine of the word of God in Israel.

The word of the Lord is rare.

It is a dreadful situation for the people of God.

For just as human beings need bread and water and crops to keep them physically alive, so they need God's word to nourish and feed their spiritual lives.
And without the word of God they will waste away.
They will be prone to all sorts of spiritual diseases.
They will be exposed to all sorts of spiritual enemies.
They will be tempted to turn to all sorts of alternative sources of sustenance.
And their spiritual existence will be in dire straights.
The people of God are people who live by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.
Without the word of God they are without the presence and guidance of God.
They lack what is essential to what is essential in life.
For as God himself has said, 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds from the mouth of God'.
And the trouble in Israel in 1 Samuel 3 is that this word of God is scarce.
The people of God are in a desperate situation.
So, let's turn to 1 Samuel 3.
Let's see what God does and how he addresses their need.
Because as we do, I think we will find out some timeless truths about the God of Israel and our God.
We will find things to nourish our souls and lives.
And we will find food to sustain us in difficult times.
For we too are people who live by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.

1 Samuel 3:1-4:1a

The context of the story (1 Samuel 3:1-3)

Let's start off by having a look at 1 Samuel 3:1-3.
These verses set the context for the chapter.
There are a few things to note.
The first sentence reminds us of the story that we've been told so far in Samuel.
First, we are introduced to Samuel.
Samuel is the son of Hannah who prayed that God would deliver her from barrenness.
He is still a lad, a young man.
But chapter 2 has also told us that he is a young man who is growing in stature and in favour with God and with the people of God.
Second, we are introduced to 'the Lord'.
Throughout the first few chapters we have seen the Lord to be active.
He has been active in closing the womb of Hannah and then in opening it.
He has been active in planning towards a king and a priest of his own choice to rule over the people of God.
He has also been active in the growth of Samuel.
And third, we are introduced to Eli.
What we know of Eli from chapters 1 and 2 is that he has not been as strong a leader as he should have been in his family life and in his life amongst the people of God.
The end result is that his sons have become grossly corrupt and are cruelly dominating the people of God and defrauding God.
In all likelihood it is this corruption that has led to a situation where the word of the Lord is rare.
This explains the second half of the verse.
The second half of the verse says that the word of the Lord was 'rare' and that there were not many visions.
The Hebrew word for 'rare' can mean 'scarce' or even 'expensive'.
The point is that with the sons of Eli in charge there is a real famine of the word of God.
There are no readily available revelations from God.

And given that chapter 2 told us that the sons of Eli 'did not know the Lord', they are not going to be the source of any of these things.

For, as we will be told in verse 7, receiving the word of God is indissolubly linked with knowing the Lord.

What's more, Eli cannot perform the task.

For as verses 2 and 3 go on to explain, Eli is nearing the end of his life.

So, there is the context.

We know that God has determined to move on from the house of Eli.

We know that God hates his people being defrauded and without his word.

We know that God is at work in the lad Samuel.

And we close this section with Samuel at sleep in the very depths of the temple, where the Ark of the covenant resides.

He is with the symbol of God's presence.

And we expect God to act.

The Call of Samuel (1 Samuel 3:4-10)

And he does.

Look at verse 4.

Then the Lord called Samuel.

The story itself is clear.

God calls Samuel four times.

Samuel thinks it is Eli calling him.

However, it gradually dawns on Eli that it is in fact the Lord that is calling.

And so he tells Samuel how to respond.

And sure enough, the Lord speaks to Samuel and Samuel hears.

However, I want you to notice some of the things we are told as the story proceeds.

In particular, I want to focus in on verse 7.

Let's read it.

⁷Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD: The word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him. [1 Samuel 3:7 - NIV]

First, I want you to notice the words that are used in relation to Samuel.

We are told that Samuel did not yet know the Lord.

The background to this is found in the previous chapter.

In 1 Samuel 2:12 we are told that the sons of Eli 'did not regard the Lord'.

The verse literally says that the sons of Eli 'did not know the Lord'.

Throughout chapter 2 we had a contrast between the sons of Eli and Samuel.

Their lack of knowing God meant that they grew in degradation.

But Samuel grew in stature and favour.

However, his growth is not yet complete.

For he still needs one fundamental characteristic if he is to be God's man.

He still needs to know the Lord.

That is, he still needs an intimate and personal knowledge of God.

And that knowledge needs to be reflected in his life and actions.

The second thing I want you to notice is that only God can grant this.

This is the point of the second half of the verse.

Knowledge of God and knowledge of the word of God can only come by God's action.

It can only come by revelation.

To know God only comes by God revealing himself.

And God's word can only come from God himself.

And this brings me to the third thing I want you to notice.

I want you to notice something that is not explicitly said in this passage but something that sits beneath the surface of everything that happens here and has happened in the preceding two chapters.

What do we learn about God here?

We learn that God is a God of supreme mercy and grace.

You see, he knows his people's situation.

He knows that they are under degraded and corrupt leadership.

He knows that they are languishing under a famine.

He knows that they are without the essentials of spiritual life – the word of God.

And so he acts in judgment and kindness and grace.

He acts in judgment in dealing with the priesthood.

And he acts in kindness and grace by revealing himself and his word to this lad.

You can see the point, can't you?

You can see one of the timeless truths of this passage.

The point is that we humans have a desperate need.

Our desperate need is for God's grace and mercy.

And God is the God of mercy and grace.

And so, he acts.

He speaks his word.

And he opens up a vehicle for the declaration of his word.

This is the God we know so well, isn't it.

This is the God who does the same in Jesus Christ.

He knows our darkness, our lostness, our inability to save ourselves, our famine for a word of help and rescue.

And he sends his Son, who is the very Word of God.

Listen to John 1:14-18 and as you do, remember that in this passage Jesus is called the Word of God.

¹⁶ From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another. ¹⁷ For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known. [John 1:16-18 - NIV]

The Role of the prophet (1 Samuel 3:11-18)

But let's return to 1 Samuel 3.

In verses 10-18 we see a prophet at work.

In verses 10-14 he listens to God give his word.

And then, in verse 17 Eli asks him to do the task of a prophet.

He asks him to be uncompromisingly straight and truthful.

He talks about his role to speak truth in sight of God and God's severe judgment.

And so, in verse 18, Samuel performs the prophetic role.

He tells Eli everything.

He hides nothing from him.

And Eli responds as all God's people should do.

You will remember last week that we felt some sympathy for Eli.

And in verse 18 I feel some sympathy for him again.

You see, this verse shows Eli to be a man of character and integrity.

He may be old.

He may be weak as a leader.

He may be physically weak and blind.

He may be psychologically weak and crushed by the behaviour of his sons.

He may be under the curse of God.

But he still has character.

And he still has integrity.

And he still has the courage to surrender totally to God's will, despite its horrible contents.

Eli may not have been all that he could have been.

But he is still God's man, submitting to God's rule.

Breaking the famine (1 Samuel 3:19-4:1a)

Let's now turn to our final verses – 1 Samuel 3:19-21.

In these verses we hear that the famine is broken.

It came in a trickle in verses 10-18 but now it comes in a flood.

The Lord continued to be with Samuel.

And the Lord let none of his words fall to the ground.

And all Israel, recognised him to be a prophet.

And where there were not many visions in verse 1, now the Lord continued to appear at Shiloh.

And where the word of the Lord was scarce, the Lord revealed himself to Samuel through his word.

And the word of Samuel, which came from the Lord, came to all Israel.

What started with a famine became a flood of wealth and productivity.

God, in his grace, gave his people their greatest need – his word.

For God knows that we do not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.

Our situation

Treating the passage with respect

So, there is 1 Samuel 3 in brief outline.

What I want to do for the rest of today's talk is to think about our own situation and what God might or might not be saying to us through it.

Now the first thing I need to say is that our situation is very different to that of 1 Samuel 3.

We are not ancient Israelites connected with the temple at Shiloh.

We are Christians who have Jesus Christ.

We therefore have the true prophet and priest and king, Jesus.

We no longer need some of the things that ancient Israelites needed.

This means that we need to be very careful about simply transforming what we see here into our own situation.

For example, I think it is a wrong reading of this chapter to read it as a call to ministry.

I also think it is wrong to simply read other aspects of our situation into this ancient text and see them as templates for our daily Christian life.

So, what then do we make of this passage?

How do we deal with it?

How is it still the word of God for us as well as ancient Israelites?

Are there timeless truths here that we can bring to our situation?

Some points to ponder

- **Point 1:**

Well, I think there are some timeless truths that spring out of this passage and that gain added input from other parts of the Bible.

My first point arises out of the theme of the famine of the word of God.

Now I think the first thing I need to say comes from a larger Biblical perspective.

You see, the New Testament tells us that God has dealt fully and finally with the issue of famines of the word of God.

Hebrews 1:1-3 helps us think about this.

Turn to this in your Bibles to Hebrews 1:1-3.

It reads like this:

¹ In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, ² but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. ³ The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. [Hebrews 1:1-3 - NIV]

Can you see the point that is being made here?

The point is that although God may have used prophets in the past, he has spoken a clearer and definitive word now.

In these last days, God has spoken to us by his Son.

In other words, in these last days God has spoken the greatest and clearest word that he can by sending his Son into the world.

And this knowledge of Jesus is now in the public domain.

It has been recorded in the pages of Scripture for all to read.

So, in one sense, we are no longer in a state of famine.

God has poured out a wealth of hunger ending information.

The famine is ended.

- **Point 2:**

My second point comes from 1 Samuel 3:7.

You will remember that verse.

We read in 1 Samuel 3:7 that...

⁷ Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD: The word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him. [1 Samuel 3:7 - NIV]

It is clear from the rest of the Bible that our situation is somewhat similar to that of Samuel's.

You see, just as in Samuel's day, knowing God is more than just a knowledge of information.

Knowing God needs God to reveal himself.

Now, we know that he has revealed himself in Jesus Christ.

However, the Bible makes clear that in order to truly apprehend this information we need the deep work of God.

We need God to be at work in us.

Jesus says these sorts of things in Matthew 11:27.

Listen to him.

He says...

²⁷ "All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. [Matthew 11:27 - NIV]

The point is that knowing Jesus is the work of God.

The thing we learn from 1 Samuel and the New Testament alike is also that we can trust God to be gracious and kind in this area.

He hates his people to be without his word and without the knowledge of him.

God's desire and inclination and promise is to meet famine with richness.

So, what is the Christian response to this?

How do Christians respond to the fact that in order to know God, God must reveal himself?

Well, Christians pray.

They ask God to be at work.

They ask him to turn people to himself, to soften hearts, to make people open to the message of the gospel.

- Point 3:

My third point also comes from asking how God makes his word known in our world.

You see, the people in Old Testament had parts of the Old Testament.

So, in one sense there was no real famine of the word of God.

They had the word of God written.

But what they didn't have was people of God who knew God who could proclaim what God was saying to them in their own situation.

Our situation is that we have the word of God incarnate – Jesus Christ.

We also have the word of God written – the Scriptures.

But God's chosen means for making his word known in his world is proclamation.

That is, we also need the word of God spoken or proclaimed.

And it needs to be spoken and proclaimed by people who know the Lord who is behind those words.

So, this is the role of the people of God.

This is our role as God's gathered people.

And this is our role as God's individual people.

Our duty and joy is to proclaim what we have seen and heard in Jesus Christ.

- Point 4:

And this leads me into my fourth point.

You see, while we have all the riches of God's full and final word who is Jesus Christ...

And while we have translation after translation of the Bible that can tell us about Jesus Christ...

I think that it is possible for us as God's people to create a self-imposed famine.

I also think it is possible for the leaders of God's people to create a situation of famine for God's people.

That is, I think it is possible to have people who name the name of Christ and who meet in the name of Christ who have placed themselves in a situation of famine.

They never hear the word of God.

It is never or rarely read.

It is not studied.

It is not preached about or explained.

And in its place we hear platitudes or moralisms or pop psychology.

This is a disastrous situation for the people of God.

And one of the reasons we exist as a church here at CCC is because we are determined not to be such a church.

But we need to be vigilant if we are to avoid throwing ourselves into famine.

We need to consciously ensure that we are rich with the word of God – personally and corporately.

So, let's continue to do what we have done so far.

But let's do it even more.

Let's act so that the word of God dwells in us richly.

Let's determine that we will feed ourselves with the word of God in our own private and family lives.

That will speak the word of God to each other.

That we will sing the word of God to each other.
And that all that we do is saturated with the word of God in Jesus Christ.

- Point 5:

And my last point builds on this previous point.

You see, one of the great ways to avoid a self-imposed famine of the word of God is to live the word of God.

But how do we go about this?

How do we start in living the word of God?

Well, Isaiah 66:2 gives one clue.

Isaiah 66:2 talk about the sort of people to whom God looks.

Let me read it to you:

“This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word.

[Isaiah 66:2 - NIV]

Let me close tonight’s talk by urging you to be these sorts of people.

Let me urge us yet again to be this sort of church.

Let’s be people who humble ourselves enough to put ourselves under the spotlight of God’s word.

Let’s here what it says.

And let’s tremble at its message.

And let’s tremble so much that we believe it, obey it, speak it, and urge each other to live it.