

How to Break the Famine in Your Life

The Great Irish Famine invaded Ireland between 1845 and 1849, bringing indescribable suffering to the country. It's estimated that more than a million lives were lost as a result of starvation and disease, but the human suffering was greater than the numbers convey. Families were torn apart, children languished in their mothers' arms, and the cries of helpless masses went unanswered by a world ill-equipped to respond.

The pages of modern history are filled with stories of similar disasters in China, Cambodia, Ethiopia and North Korea—each one having its own cause. What was the cause of such devastation in the case of the Great Irish Famine? The suffering began with a tiny spore that silently multiplied and almost instantly destroyed Ireland's potato crops. Without warning, a nation's food supply simply rotted, toppling its economy. The lives of the Irish were traumatized for decades to come.

Hidden things sometimes unleash famine in our lives, as well. King David discovered this truth near the end of his long reign over Israel (see 2 Sam. 21:,14). A mysterious and relentless famine struck his people.

Year after year passed, and still the painful plague wouldn't lift. Rain didn't fall, seeds couldn't take root, and harvests never sprang up. God's people were drowning in a flood of lack.

David inquired of the Lord, who revealed the root of the problem. He reminded David of Saul's injustice toward the Gibeonites.

Centuries before, Joshua and the elders of Israel had sworn a covenant to protect this minority people in exchange for their

surrender and service (see Josh. 9). But Saul was blind to the value of relationships—even those sheltered by sacred promise.

To him, the needs of outsiders were irrelevant. Saul gave the order to wipe out the Gibeonites, and in so doing, he infected his land and his people with an invisible spore of sin that resulted in a tragic famine.

Naturally speaking, famines are extended times of lack. They begin with a disruption of the food supply, often brought on by a period of drought or war. The process of sowing seed and reaping a harvest is interrupted, and malnutrition, disease and death follow.

Famine of the Heart

During my years as a pastor, I've seen that extended times of emotional and spiritual affliction can lead to what I call a "famine of the heart." The famine of the heart is a season of distress, often the result of spiritual attacks or periods of dryness. The prophet Amos spoke of times when there would be 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, NKJV).

We've all have bad days or weeks, but famines of the heart are longer and far more serious. We run short of joy. Our peace dries up, and we search in vain for a sense of God's presence. Nothing we plant seems to prosper.

The suffering during these seasons can be devastating. It goes deeper than the inconvenience of lack.

When our heart is famished, we grow more confused, hopeless and weary with each day. The seeds of faith shrivel, and our hearts lack the Spirit's fruit of love, joy and peace. When long seasons pass without the Spirit's refreshing rain, we are in a famine of the heart.

Yet famines lift when we listen to God. When David inquired of the Lord, it was the beginning of a breakthrough.

There is a brilliant openness about David. He was willing to follow the truth, no matter where it took him.

He didn't detach from God or blame Him for the pain. He didn't pass his suffering off as mere chance. He was willing to ask the Lord about the cause.

He obviously wondered: Is it possible that Israel has become infected deep within? What will break this famine and restore the harvest of blessing?

Like it was for Israel, it is useless for us to try to fix a famine by fussing around with surface things while ignoring the true causes deep inside. Root issues are critical and must be addressed.

A woman who has endured a lifetime of rejection may find antidepressants useful in numbing her pain, but until she deals with her root issues, she won't be free.

A man who struggles to commit to his wife's needs alone may find an escape from his guilt and confusion in endless hours of television, but until he allows God to work on his root issues, his marriage will never flourish.

Israel's famine was rooted in the issue of the broken covenant with the Gibeonites. It was a sin problem that required a spiritual solution. Understanding this, David asked them what could be done to heal the pain.

The Gibeonites sought neither the payback of revenge nor a payoff of money—they wanted Saul's sin acknowledged and made right. They wanted justice.

The solution, which might seem harsh at first, was that Saul's descendants paid the price with their lives. This was no mob lynching—it was a remission of sin that was sanctioned by

heaven (see 2 Sam. 21:9).

The messy business of broken covenants had opened the door to famine. Only a sacrifice could close that door and settle the sin-debt Saul had created.

Right now, the Holy Spirit is digging deep in our lives, helping us to understand root issues. Because He loves us, He's revealing the hidden causes of our lack and pain.

John the Baptist described times like this when he said, "'And even now the ax is being laid to the root of the trees'" (Matt. 3:10). It's time to stop putting Band-Aids on tumors. The Great Physician longs to do a surgical work that brings healing to the root of our problems.

Breaking the Famine

The Bible makes it clear that sin can be remitted only by a sacrifice (see Heb. 9:22). Thankfully, the blood of our Deliverer-King was shed at the cross to satisfy divine justice and restore our famished hearts.

Isaiah foresaw the sin-remitting power of Christ's sacrifice: "It pleased the Lord to bruise Him; He has put Him to grief. When You make His soul an offering for sin ... He shall see the labor of His soul, and be satisfied. ... My righteous Servant shall justify many, for He shall bear their iniquities" (Is. 53:10-11).

Christ also understood His sacrifice as full payment for sin. As He poured the wine at the Last Supper, He told His disciples: "'This is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins'" (Matt. 26:28).

The sons of Saul no longer have to die to end our famines. Christ has settled our sin-debt forever, bringing us the promise that we can be free from the spiritual famines of this sin-infected world.

One day a broken woman stumbled into our church office. She had just been released from jail. She was penniless, hopeless and ignorant of Christ's desire to repair her tormented life. She came to us because her car had broken down in front of our building, and she didn't know what else to do.

She asked: "Can anyone help me? I have nothing left but pain."

As we ministered to her famished heart, she confessed her sins and accepted Jesus. We dealt with lifelong roots of rejection, shame and fear. Her hurts were washed away in a stream of tears, and we watched as her famine lifted. Today she is happily married and leads a successful ministry in our church to emotionally broken people.

To activate Christ's famine-breaking power in our lives, we must be willing to confront our failures through honest confession. Like David, we must come clean with God.

We begin by asking ourselves: Am I holding on to unconfessed sin? Am I violating God's Word? Am I perpetrating injustice? Have I withheld forgiveness, broken covenant, or given place to bitterness, pride, lust or greed?

Dishonesty and denial only shelter the spores that impoverish our hearts. Coming clean with God connects us with the power of the cross and the sacrifice of Jesus. Confession and repentance break the root of sin and release us back into our harvest of joy:

"If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

After Israel's sin root was cut the famine ended (see 2 Sam. 21:14). What a welcome release! The rains fell again, watering and reviving the dormant seeds of blessing.

At the same time, the nation's anxiety lifted. Prosperity

returned, and David's song rang out: "[The righteous] shall not be ashamed in the evil time, and in the days of famine they shall be satisfied" (Ps. 37:19).

This story speaks to our lives: Hidden things create pain. Root issues are important. Sin creates suffering. Confession brings healing.

But most important, because of Christ, there is hope for the famished heart. He promises to "satisfy your soul in drought, and strengthen your bones" (Is. 58:11). He reassures us: "You shall be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail" (v. 11).

If your heart is famished, run to these promises. Don't cut yourself off from God or blame Him for the pain. Dig deeper and ask the Lord to lay His ax to the root. Come to the cross, and let the rain of His presence restore you. Your famine will end. The once-dead seeds of faith and hope will take root again, and your harvest of joy will return.

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Ending America's Barrenness

Christians in the U.S. have learned that it is vitally important to deal with root issues of injustice in the nation's past.

The spiritual lessons of famine, broken covenant and confession apply to our lives personally, but they do not end there. The story of Saul's injustice toward the Gibeonites

teaches us how the sinful spores of racism, economic injustice, and bigotry can infect and oppress our entire nation.

Chief Jay Swallow, a widely recognized Native American minister, often describes his own journey of healing along these lines. Many Americans are unaware that our government has broken hundreds of covenants with Native Americans. Our centuries-long history of cruelty has produced enormous pain and resistance to Christ in Native communities.

Swallow's ancestors were innocent victims of the Washita Massacre in 1868. As a child, he heard the accounts of their violent deaths. He became bitter toward his government and angry with his often-insensitive white brothers and sisters in Christ.

When Swallow visited the site of the massacre in 1997, his famished heart began to heal through the identificational repentance of John Benefiel and the leaders of the Oklahoma Apostolic Prayer Network. Sensing Swallow's raw emotions and God's heart to heal, the leaders knelt on that site and broke before God. When they repented for the sins of our government, Swallow extended forgiveness and subsequently experienced a transforming flood of personal healing and freedom.

Today these same leaders are working together to reach Native Americans. Confession is cleansing the stain of broken covenants and releasing personal freedom for thousands across the Midwest.

Many Christians believe our nation will not see revival until we address our mistreatment of Native Americans. For this reason, leaders such as Kansas Sen. Sam Brownback are urging the passage of the Resolution of Apology to the Native Peoples (nativeres.org), which apologizes for our government's role in the suffering of Native people. If enacted, the resolution could bring about a turning point in our country not unlike

that experienced by Israel after it made restitution to the Gibeonites.

For the power of the cross to transform our nation, we must confess and confront sin, injustice and broken covenants on a national level. If we are willing to address our root issues, we'll see famine break up across the land, just as Scripture has promised:

“‘If My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land'” (2 Chr. 7:14, NKJV).