

Facing Famine in Faith

Introduction. The Great Chinese Famine was a famine that occurred between 1959 and 1961 in the People's Republic of China. It's widely regarded as the deadliest famine and one of the greatest man-made disasters in human history, with an estimated death toll due to starvation that ranges from 30 to 40 million.

When you look up who is responsible for the most deaths in human history, the answer will be Mao Zedong. He committed a lot of atrocities, including beatings, executions, and imprisonments. But by far and away, his Great Leap Forward policy (1958-1962) was responsible for the vast majority of the deaths.

"Famine" comes from an Old French word meaning "hunger" — an extreme scarcity of food. We're talking about a famine of faith — an extreme scarcity of something that should exist in abundance (2 Corinthians 8:7; Colossians 2:6-7).

In the financial world it's possible to have "negative growth." It sounds like an oxymoron, but it refers to an economic decline over a stated period of time.

Spiritually speaking, it's possible to be going the wrong direction, to be in decline, to experience "negative growth."

There's possibly nothing more important than trying to address a famine in your faith. In this lesson we're going to investigate three expressions that are used to make the point in the New Testament.

I. We Face a Famine When Our Hearts Grow Dull

- A. Matthew 13:15 contains a quote from the prophet Isaiah describing the sad spiritual condition of ancient Israel. More importantly, Jesus said the scribes, Pharisees, and religious leaders had grown into this perilous condition.
- B. The word "dull" means "to thicken or fatten." The NIV renders the word "calloused."
 1. Paul used this quote in Acts 28:27 to describe those Jews who rejected and refused to hear the gospel of Christ. It speaks of those who willfully and deliberately shut out the truth from their minds and hearts.
 2. The English word "dull" is used elsewhere in Hebrews 5:11 but it's a different Greek word. This word means "to be lazy or sluggish."
 3. Has your heart grown dull, fat, calloused, or closed? Are you unwilling to allow the Word to penetrate your heart to germinate and grow?
- C. Like the Pharisees we may have allowed traditions, opinions, and personal prejudices to affect our receptivity to truth, thus causing the heart to grow dull.
- D. If that's the case, what can I do to spur change? Here's a few suggestions for you to think about:
 1. Experience God's Word: You can listen to messages and sermons about Jesus, or systematically read your Bible. You can also memorize a passage or study it in depth with commentary.
 2. Pray: Prayer brings clarity and strengthens your conviction. Paul prayed for the Philippians to develop knowledge and discernment (1:9).

3. Find biblical fellowship: You can assemble with and reach out to people who are pursuing the Lord, worshiping with them and allowing them to build you up (Proverbs 27:17).
4. Set and achieve goals: Small steps that add up to big results can improve your confidence and faith in yourself.
5. Step out of your comfort zone: You can take part in leading worship, lead a Bible study class, or something more manageable like writing and encouraging a visitor or making a commitment to memorize a passage.
6. Journal and mark your Bible: Bible marking can train you to analyze Scripture while journaling can help you process your thoughts and remind you to reconnect with your values.
7. Meditate: Meditation can help you calm your mind and concentrate on growing closer to God.

II. We Face a Famine When Our Love Grows Cold

- A. In Matthew 24:12, Jesus talked about a cold heart. And we instinctively know what it means to have a cold heart.
 1. Cold-hearted people are distant and detached.
 2. Cold-hearted people find it difficult to feel empathy and sympathy. They keep their distance physically and emotionally. They lack concern and compassion for the problems others may face. They're usually self-centered, insensitive, unresponsive, and unmoved.
 3. Religiously, this begins by failing to grow in our love for God.
 - a) When our love for God grows cold, it'll impact our relationship with other people, but especially those in the body of Christ.
 - b) This is similar to casting off our first faith (1 Timothy 5:12) and leaving our first love (Revelation 2:4).
- B. Cold-hearted people weren't born that way. The gospel doesn't produce a cold heart. And a lot of times, it's not the fault of the church. They simply experienced negative growth. They need, like Paul, to be zealous (Acts 22:3). This includes being zealous for good works (Titus 2:14; 1 John 3:17).
 1. The Greek word *zēlos* literally means "hot enough to boil." It's metaphorically used to describe "burning anger, love, zeal," or "boiling anger, love, zeal, for what is good or bad." In the Bible, *zēlos* can mean "excitement of mind, ardor, fervor of spirit, fierceness."
 2. When the church at Laodicea was drifting into lukewarmness, they were told to be zealous and repent (Revelation 3:19). From this, we know that our zeal can be increased and cold hearts can be changed.

III. We Face a Famine When We Grow Weary in Doing Good

- A. Galatians 6:9-10 alludes to what I'm going to refer to as spiritual burnout.
 1. Spiritual burnout is a common malady in the Lord's church.
 2. Burnout "is a state of emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion caused by excessive and prolonged stress. It occurs when you feel overwhelmed, emotionally drained, and unable to meet constant demands."

- B. We may grow weary by the amount of work to be done, the indifference of others, or by the wickedness in the world. Yet, we're urged not to grow weary (cp. 2 Thessalonians 3:13; Hebrews 12:3).
- C. "Don't lose heart," the apostle encourages. We can overcome weariness by staying focused on Jesus Christ.
 - 1. His existence and example helps us keep our priorities in line, seek the mutual support of other disciples, and work like He did for the harvest time (John 4:35; 9:3-5).
 - 2. This develops our patient continuance in God's will (Acts 13:43; Romans 2:7; 2 Timothy 3:14). In a simple idea, you need to "hold fast" and not let anyone "take your crown" (Revelation 3:11).

Conclusion. Luke 2:52 says that "Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men." Other translations render the verb "grew" as "increased." The NASB translated it "kept increasing," which suggests continued action. The word means "to advance, to proceed, or to drive forward."

This statement was made when Jesus was 12 years old. And was made following Jesus' pronouncement to His mother, Mary: "I must be about My Father's business." Jesus continued to grow physically, mentally, emotionally, socially, and spiritually for 20 years.

I don't want you to face a famine in your faith. To assess where you are in your faith, let me go through ten important questions:

1. Are you growing in your relationship with God? Do you feel closer and more ore connected with a deeper love? (Matthew 22:37-38).
2. Is your prayer life stronger, and more personal and deeply transparent? (James 5:16).
3. Has worship moved beyond a place you go to something you participate in? Something you experience? Is worship more God centered and Christ focused? (John 4:23-24).
4. Is discipleship a daily process? Is God's will demonstrated in your home? Work? Social interactions? Recreational activities? And decision making? (Matthew 28:19-20).
5. Have you become more sensitive to sin? More aware of its consequences? Deeply remorseful for its affront to God? (Ephesians 2:1-10).
6. Are you becoming more grace oriented in your life? Seeing salvation impossible apart from God? Growing in grace? Admitting your inadequacy apart from God's grace? (1 Corinthians 15:10).
7. Are you growing by producing the fruit of the Spirit in your life? Love? Joy? Peace? Patience? Kindness? Goodness? Faithfulness? Gentleness? Self-Control? (Galatians 5:22-23).
8. Are you adding to your faith moral excellence? Knowledge? Perseverance? Godliness? Brotherly kindness? (2 Peter 1:5-9).
9. Are you growing in your relationships with other people? Are you more loving? Compassionate? Forgiving? Helpful? (Matthew 7:12; Ephesians 4:32).
10. Is your hope becoming stronger? More heaven focused? Looking forward to going home with God? (Colossians 1:5; 3:1-2).

We're grateful for all our mothers out there. God gave fathers the responsibility to bring their children up (Ephesians 6:4), but a lot of times, even in well-meaning families, that falls to the mother. Therefore, it's mothers who frequently create a spiritual thirst within their children. But over time, you may have encountered a spiritual famine. If you're not growing spiritually, or you're experiencing negative growth, then let us help. Let the gospel into your heart and let your brethren encourage you back to righteousness before God.

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