

A Subtle Yet Devastating Curse

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In October 2008, a protest movement called "The Atheist Bus Campaign" began in London. It was the brainchild of a woman who became offended when she saw a poster on a bus that read, "When the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?" She decided that she and her fellow atheists needed to respond publicly with their own message, so she began raising funds to buy ads on London buses. Her campaign was an unexpected success, and in January 2009, the ads began to appear, reading: "There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life."

In Amos 8, God says that He will soon send a peculiar famine—not a typical famine of food or water, but a far more destructive one. It strikes at the heart of His people, causing the very fabric of society to unravel and resulting in things like the Atheist Bus Campaign, with its blind and blasphemous motto. Amos 8:11-12 reads:

"Behold, the days are coming," says the Lord God, "That 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. They shall wander from sea to sea, and from north to east; they shall run to and fro, seeking the word of the Lord, but shall not find it."

Notice first that it does not say that it will be a famine of the *word* of the Lord, but a famine of *hearing*. God's words will still be available, but it will be rare that those words will be heard. The truth will still be obtainable; His inspired messages will still be accessible. However, as a curse on the land, God will cause truth not to be heard.

This "hearing" is far more than just being aware of words or concepts. It is a hearing that includes focused, careful attention that, taken to its logical conclusion, ends in obedience. The kind of hearing that will be in such short supply is one that causes right action—in fact, the Hebrew word is often translated as "obey." This famine causes God's words not to be heard, and the result is that sin and disobedience flourish—which are a reproach to any nation (Proverbs 14:34). It is a tremendous curse, because without having God's words as guidance—without the light of truth—the nation will be like a blind man, stumbling around and not comprehending why he keeps falling (*cf.* Deuteronomy 28:29; Isaiah 29:9-10).

This is an unusual curse. It is not like a physical famine, which everyone recognizes as a tragedy. Most of those who are struck by this famine will probably not recognize that it *is* a true calamity. A famine of hearing the truth will seem like a relief to many, because no voice is calling them into account or prompting them to think about eternity.

However, even though this famine may give the impression that a burden has been lifted, the reality is that without divine instruction, the nation can only stagger toward eventual destruction. Truth is a blessing, but God has every right to withhold it, just as He withholds rain when His people turn from Him. People may be vaguely aware that things are breaking down, that life seems to have a lot more tragedies, and that nothing seems to work as it once did, but they will not make the connection between their hardships and their spiritual deafness.

New Testament Echoes

The New Testament contains echoes of this type of curse. Romans 1:18-32 tells of unrighteous men who *suppress the truth*. Because they are not thankful for what the creation reveals of the Creator, their foolish hearts become darkened. They lose what light, what truth, they have.

God's response to this is similar to His response to Israel. He does not contend with them or force His truth on them. Instead, Paul writes, God *gave them up* to uncleanness. He *gave them up* to vile passions. He *gave them over* to a debased mind. It is as if God gives them exactly what they seek, and they do not realize that it is a curse.

A second example of this principle appears in II Thessalonians 2:9-12, where Paul warns of a future Man of Sin who deceives the spiritually weak:

The coming of the lawless one is according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs, and lying wonders, and with all unrighteous deception among those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved. And for this reason God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie, that they all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.

Those who perish do so because they do not *receive*—in the sense of "welcome"—the love of the truth. Because they do not, God will send them strong delusion, so that they will believe the lie and be condemned. In reality, God is just giving them what they desire anyway. They *prefer* carnal delusion to spiritual reality, so God obliges them. The unrighteous in Romans 1 desire a worldview without a Creator so they can be sexually liberated. God gives them over to it and lets them reap the awful consequences. The Israelites in the time of Amos did not value God's truth, so He removed it, letting them experience how miserably they fare without it. If they were anything like modern Israelites, they thought of themselves as enlightened and progressive even as their blindness became more complete.

Amos 8:12 describes people wandering about in a vain attempt to regain the word of the Lord. Some of the people seem to realize that something is missing. They wander and even run "to and fro," but they do not find it. Part of the reason is that they are unwilling to look in the right place. Notice where they are willing and not willing to wander: They go "from sea to sea"—probably meaning from the Mediterranean Sea to the Dead Sea—so they will go from east to west. They will also go "from north to east." The only direction they will not go is toward the south. Why?

Amos prophesied to the northern tribes of Israel. Shortly after Israel broke from Judah, King Jeroboam of Israel feared that Israel would reunite with Judah, because Judah was where Jerusalem and the Temple were. He therefore devised his own religious system, leading the northern ten tribes into gross idolatry. He appointed his own priesthood, established his own feast days, and created his own centers of worship, removing the need for the northern Israelites to travel south to Judah.

The Israelites were willing to expend some effort in seeking the words of God, but they were unwilling to go where they actually needed to—where the Temple was. To a degree, they wanted the truth, but on their own terms. They were not so hungry for it that they would sacrifice for it. They wanted it, but not if they had to humble themselves and go to the Temple, where God was. As a result, they could not find the words of the Lord again.

The Erosion of American Belief

This same process happened in the modern nations of Israel, particularly in America. Though America has never been a true Christian nation, at its founding God's Word was held in high regard, and biblical principles were considered to be essential to the success of the Republic. However, during the mid- to late-1800s, bits of secular humanism began creeping into the larger culture. As the nation prospered because of God's promises to Abraham, it acted out exactly what God predicted in Deuteronomy 32:15: It grew fat and kicked, and forsook Him.

Gradually, the words of the Lord were edged out of the picture, and each succeeding generation arose with a diminished regard for the Bible. This nation began with a President, George Washington, who wholeheartedly believed, and was willing to proclaim, "It is impossible to rightly govern the world without God and the Bible." Now, however, it is illegal to pray in schools, to speak warmly about Christianity or the Bible in a school or government office, and to post the Ten Commandments in a courthouse.

As the Word of God was neglected and rejected, it began to be replaced. What bits of truth this nation had are quickly falling out of favor. Even the worldly, syncretistic Christianity—with its Sunday-worship, Christmas, Easter, and pagan trinity-god—is being rejected. It is being rejected, not because of its falsehoods, but because of the bits of truth within it that still call people into account, directly or indirectly.

Journalist and novelist G.K. Chesterton observed, "When people stop believing in God, they do not believe in nothing. They believe in anything." *Something* will fill the belief void. Even atheism is a belief system. To put it another way, a starving man will eat whatever is at hand—even if it is slow poison. Thus, we have seen rapid growth in secular humanism, Eastern religions, Islam, and Wicca and New Age religions. Apparently, an increasing number of people are even claiming "Jedi" as their belief system!

Nominal Christianity has become so weak that in Britain, more people attend each week in a mosque than in a church. God's words, even in a watered-down form, are not being heard, and while some may still be searching for truth, they are not willing to seek out the true spiritual Temple that can actually provide nourishment. The church of God is still publishing the truth, still proclaiming the Word of God, but the response is nowhere near what occurred under Herbert Armstrong during the last century. People are simply not hearing the words, except in rare cases. Perhaps part of this curse—this famine of hearing—is that God has not *gifted* anyone the way He gifted Herbert Armstrong.

Amos describes those most susceptible to this famine—and their end:

In that day the fair virgins and strong young men shall faint from thirst. Those who swear by the sin of Samaria, who say, "As your god lives, O Dan!" and, "As the way of Beersheba lives!" They shall fall and never rise again. (Amos 8:13-14)

The first victims of this famine are the young. They are more susceptible because their parents failed to provide a solid foundation of truth. The young only know what the older generation has taught them. With anything remotely Christian being banished from public schools and colleges and ridiculed in the media, and with churches increasingly neglecting the Word of God, the youth are being supplied with a very weak or non-existent diet of truth.

God created mankind with a spiritual capacity, and our minds naturally crave something to excite us, fill us, and give us answers. If God's words are not sustaining the youth of the nation, something else will. Thus, the rap culture has become a religion—a belief system, a way of life—for some. The philosophy of materialism is firmly entrenched in these fertile minds, which are being fed all day yet starved of truth. Eco-religions and nature worship are drawing others off course. Witchcraft and other elements of the occult fill the minds of others. Eastern and New Age beliefs are becoming more mainstream, and we even have the cult of Oprah!

An entire generation is falling for the line that there is no absolute truth, that everyone's opinion is valid (unless that opinion is biblical), and that the only modern sin is to judge. All of these forms of idolatry are flourishing because God's words are not being heard, and something else has taken their place.

Amos 8:14 describes those who are so adamantly committed to their idolatry, who are so spiritually sick from malnourishment, that they will "fall and never rise again." So much for the supporters of the "Atheist Bus Campaign."

The Solution

One of God's annual feasts instructs us in how we can avoid becoming a casualty of such a famine of hearing. The New Testament clearly shows that Jesus Christ and the disciples observed the Feast of Unleavened Bread (see Matthew 26:17; Mark 14; Luke 22), and the latter did so even after Jesus' death (Acts 12:3; 20:6; I Corinthians 5:7-8).

In the New Testament, leavening and unleavened bread take on added meaning that the ancient Israelites did not grasp. In addition to leavening symbolizing sin, hypocrisy, and pride, Jesus uses it as a metaphor for false doctrine (Matthew 16:11-12). Conversely, Paul describes unleavened bread as symbolic of "sincerity and truth" (I Corinthians 5:8). A famine of hearing God's words, then, is like a famine of eating unleavened bread. When such a famine occurs, people turn to eating leavening—false doctrines, false philosophies, and ways of thinking that are ultimately "malice and wickedness."

Remember that this famine, this curse, simply continues the trajectory that the people are already on. They suppress the truth and reject God's Word, and so God gives them what they ask for. However, this famine begins in the heart, in the mind. It has its genesis in the regard and esteem—or lack thereof—in which the people hold God's Word. When His Word is not valued, God takes away the hearing of it. The result is stumbling, as the people lack the means to evaluate their circumstances and make right decisions.

The church is not immune to this effect. During the 1970s and later, many members of the Worldwide Church of God stopped studying, and the church began to resemble a social club. After Herbert Armstrong died, the spiritual malnourishment became evident. Because so many had stopped feeding themselves with His truth, God gave them over to the leavening of Protestantism.

The instructions for the Days of Unleavened Bread give a solution—a simple one, but one that takes continual diligence. God instructs, on the one hand, to remove all leavening and to ensure that none is seen with us (Exodus 12:15, 19-20; 13:3, 7; Deuteronomy 16:3-4). He is telling us to be vigilant to keep the falsehoods out. We are to guard against this world's philosophies and ways that may *seem* harmless enough, but are actually slowly poisoning the mind.

On the other hand, God instructs us to eat unleavened bread—to take in truth—every day (Exodus 12: 15, 17-18, 20; 13:6-7; 23:15; 34:18; Numbers 28:17; Deuteronomy 16:3, 8). In fact, God gives more instructions about eating unleavened bread than about avoiding leavening. If the relative number of instructions is significant, ingesting truth to make it a part of us is more important than avoiding falsehood. Even the name of the festival suggests that the greater emphasis is on the unleavened bread, which ultimately represents Jesus Christ Himself.

Of course, neither action can be neglected—God requires us to do both. Yet studying truth is vital because it enables us to identify and resist the leavening—to recognize what is false because we are so familiar with what is true.

The mind will feed itself on something. If we pass over the truth for something that may not be altogether wrong but is not actually nourishing, over time we will become spiritually weak and unable to resist the lies. All the while, because our minds are full, we may not realize that we are starving ourselves to spiritual death. This does not happen overnight, but it does happen.

This famine of hearing occurs as a result of people not esteeming the Word of God, and because it is not valued and not acted upon, He removes it. However, it does not have to be that way with us. We have been blessed with understanding—with the ability to hear God's words and rightly respond. If we value the truth, we will continually search it out, and we will hear it. Because we value it, we will recognize what is false and contrary, and not want to have anything to do with it.

The preventative for this famine lies in what we value, what we appreciate, and what our priorities are. If we are seeking God's truth—if we are diligently ingesting this unleavened bread every day and carefully avoiding what is false—God will continue to feed us and bless us with His truth.