

Sermon File # 513

Scripture Text: Genesis 12:10-13:4

Message Title: *Famine in the Land of Promise*

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On Sunday morning June 29, 2014

At East Madison Baptist Church, Madison, Wisconsin.

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the New International Version, 2011.

Sources cited in this manuscript are listed at the end.

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Famine in the Land of Promise

Introduction:

Last Sunday we examined the call of Abram (later to be named Abraham), and noted his obedient faith, despite the unknown and difficult experiences he was to face. We will consider today and next Sunday some challenges to the faith of the one who is our father in faith (Galatians 3:7).

We recall that Abram and Sarai remarkably obeyed the Lord, and made the 500 mile journey to the land God promised them. Today we see these two former pagans, after their impressive demonstration of faith in obeying the Lord who had just revealed himself to them, immediately facing difficulty in this Promised Land. We will observe them encountering the difficulty of a severe famine. Archaeologists and geologists have found evidence of a massive 300-year drought cycle at the end of the 3rd Millennium and at the beginning of the 2nd Millennium BC, one of the time periods for dating Abram (Walton, 395).

Follow as I read **Genesis 12:10-13:4**, as we note how Abram and Sarai reacted to this famine, and the circumstances in which they found themselves.

“Famine” is defined as “an extreme scarcity of food” but also as “a great shortage” (*Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*). Probably no one here today has had to go through a literal famine of food in a land ravaged by drought. But many of us as followers of Jesus Christ as Lord know about other great shortages in our lives. The issue for us today is not if famine comes, but what to do whenever it does come. This is similar to what James writes, when he encourages us how to think and to act “whenever” we face trials of many kinds.” To paraphrase James, he would say, “Whenever we face famines of many kinds,” we are to react with joy and assurance that God is at work to strengthen our faith and develop maturity in character during these days of famine (James 1:2-8).

Perhaps today you are in the midst of a famine in your life. Some of you may be acutely aware of your famine; others may not even notice that there is a severe deficiency and need in your life. But as pilgrims and sojourners in the faith, we can expect, just as did Abram, to face a famine, soon after arriving in the Promised Land of eternal life and a saving relationship with Christ. As we noted last Sunday, The Promised Land and Canaan is not primarily a reference to everlasting life in the new heaven and earth; but the moment we become children of God by faith in Jesus Christ we enter the Promised Land of the life of God in our souls. We are seated with Christ now in the heavenly realms (Ephesians 2:6), and are citizens of the heavenly city and kingdom (Ephesians 2:19).

Perhaps you’re a new Christian and you were under the impression that once you gave your life to Christ, your problems would be over. Now you’ve discovered that becoming a Christian introduced to you a whole new set of problems, such as misunderstanding, rejection and ongoing temptation. Or perhaps you recently made a commitment to follow God’s will, and your commitment led you to move your family, or to resign a lucrative career job. It may be that you recently embarked on a promising career or began a business that you were certain was God’s will for you, but now, since famine has come, you’re not so sure. That business that seemed so promising and that God assured you was his will, may not be doing so well. Perhaps because of problems, disappointments or difficult relationships at work have faced you with the famine of insecurity and new doubts about God’s leading in your life. There might even be a newly married couple experiencing famine in your marriage relationship, one that seemed to promise so much but now is delivering little in the way of peace, joy and happiness. Perhaps there is a mature, long-time Christian worker and faithful follower of Jesus, for whom of late God has been silent. Nothing seems to be happening in your life and ministry and even in your prayers that indicate God’s presence and activity in you, your delight in God is not what it was and so for you there is a spiritual famine.

Even for those who are still exulting in your Promised Land of God's blessings, you need to realize that a time of famine, a time of trial and testing will indeed come. And we need to be prepared to react in away that will strengthen our faith, which is God's purpose in famines.

The first thing we notice about famine in the land of promise is...

Famine is predictable

As we think of famine in the broader sense as any want, need or deficiency in our lives, we must assume that it is inevitable (James 1:2ff). Commenting on Abram and Sarai's encountering famine in the land of promise, Old Testament scholar Joyce Baldwin writes, "Early on in his spiritual experience Abram was discovering that to be in the place of God's appointment is not to be exempt from suffering." And she notes that "As the psalmist found, the person who declares his trust in the Lord sometimes seems to be singled out for trouble, while the godless prosper" (Psalm 73:2-14; Baldwin, 37). And when it comes into our experience...

Famine is sudden

One of the first lessons for a new follower of Jesus is to expect times of testing and to live in vigilance against famine. Even Jesus himself, following the inauguration of his public ministry with his baptism, was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to experience a 40-day fast when he was severely tempted by the devil (Matthew 3:13-4:11, and parallels).

There is a sense in which we can never anticipate the next famine in our lives, and humanly speaking, we may appear as vulnerable as Abram and Sarai in this unknown land, so far from family and all they had ever known. Even though we cannot know when famine will come, we nevertheless do not have to be taken off guard. The psalmist describes how a righteous, "will have no fear of bad news; his heart is steadfast, trusting in the Lord" (Psalm 112:6-7).

It can be amazing how rapidly famine can follow the times of greatest blessing, spiritual inspiration and joy. But remember that...

Famine follows faith

Abram and Sarai were called out of paganism to be the parents of God's new people and nation. And by faith they came into the unknown land of promise as strangers. They already had a faith perspective, "looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God" (Hebrews 11:10).

Saul of Tarsus was radically converted from a persecutor of the church to a Spirit-anointed and empowered apostle-missionary and writer of epistles that are

a large part of inspired Scripture. Soon after his conversion he was faced with the famine of suspicion and rejection from the Christian community and he needed the encouragement of Barnabas to introduce him to the fellowship of the church.

We would do well, in our discipling of new believers, to teach them to expect the times of famine the testing times, and that...

Famine should strengthen faith

The moment we are born into God's family, the heavenly Father goes to work in strengthening our faith, teaching us to live by faith and no longer by sight. Satan himself is always willing to "volunteer" with the new Christian. The devil's intent is to try to totally defeat the believer by famine, by discouragement and my temptations to doubt, disbelieve and to disobey. But, as we see from our text and from the Book of Job, God's purpose is to strengthen us in our faith. Thus Satan instigates evil, such as with Job's suffering and with famine in the land of promise. But God uses difficulty to test and to strengthen us in him and to make us stronger in faith and trust, readying us for the next challenge.

I think this is a part of the discipline process that we read about in Hebrews 12, how our wise heavenly Father disciplines those he loves. And the purpose of the Father's discipline is for our good, "that we might share in his holiness." The writer goes on to say, "No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful." And might I add, the same is true for famine. Famines are painful experiences. But as the writing pastor of Hebrews continues, "Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it" (Hebrews 12:4-11).

In the words of Bible teacher Warren Wiersbe, "a faith that can't be tested can't be trusted" and "the only way to advance in the school of faith is to take exams." Wiersbe moves the analogy to the discipline of athletics, and notes that "God uses the tough circumstances of life to build the muscles of your faith" (Wiersbe, 23f).

And, God is not through testing and strengthening and refining us until we get to heaven, as the apostle Paul knew quite well. After his experience of ecstasy in the third heaven, Paul was given a messenger of Satan, a thorn in his side, to keep him from pride and to teach him to rely solely upon the grace of God (2 Corinthians 12:9-10). Abram and Sarai faced a severe drought, and the intent of God was to teach them to rely upon his grace, and even upon his miraculous provision during this time.

It takes grace to trust God during a famine, but that's what God expects of us, in order that he might strengthen us in faith. As James Boice said, it often takes more grace to stay in the land of promise than to get there in the first place. This

was certainly true of Abram and Sarai (Boice, 40ff). And it's been true for me. In a previous pastorate it was no struggle to go there, since there were attractive features about the church's ministry and opportunities, and a lot of advantages for our family and extended family. But after our first five years we experienced conflict and opposition that seemed to be at times insurmountable. We knew in that one pastorate of 19 years several seasons of real famine, and only the grace of God sustained us and the assurance of his calling there allowed us to remain there during those famine times. What God was teaching Abram he was also teaching me, to believe that famous quote: "The will of God will never lead you where the grace of God cannot keep you."

God doesn't test us to know about us. He already does. He wants us to know about the quality of our faith. As with Abram and Sarai, he was showing them where they were in the level of their faith, and would soon make clear, through this test, that they had some growing to do before an even greater test would come. Of course, Satan's purpose in trials and temptations is to lead us away from God in bitterness and the failure and abandonment of faith. But God uses trials, as he did this famine, to teach a lesson of faith. Had Abram and Sarai stood in the strength of the Lord and fully trusted him, God would have provided for them during this famine time, and they would have experienced the miraculous provision of God, perhaps like the water from the rock that God would later provide for the Israelites in the wilderness (Exodus 17). And, like the Israelites, pursued by the Egyptian army, they needed to heed the word of the Lord, to "stand firm and...see the deliverance the Lord will bring" (Exodus 14:13-14). Again, Wiersbe says it best: "In times of testing, the important question is not, 'How can I get out of this?' but rather 'What can I get out of this?'" (Wiersbe, 23).

Famine should strengthen faith, but as with Abram and Sarai, so with us...

Faltering in faith is possible

Having said all of the above, the reality of the situation is that Abram and Sarai experienced a lapse in their faith but not a loss of their faith. God saw to that, even as Jesus prayed for Peter that even though he would deny his Lord, his faith would not fail and that he would come to repentance (Luke 22:31-32). In this lapse of faith, they "went down" to Egypt (verse 10), even as Jonah would go "down to Joppa" (Jonah 1:3), fleeing from places where God had called them.

Faltering in faith, even as with Simon Peter, is to act outside of the will of God and without complete trust in God. And because of our human frailty, we all will experience at times in our lives such a faltering. Only our Lord Jesus himself avoided such a lapse. In our discipleship of new believers we need to warn them of this possibility and also, as more mature believers, need to take heed lest we

also falter (1 Corinthians 10:12). More than simply warning our weaker brothers and sisters, we should be ready to restore them (Galatians 6:1-2).

This faltering in faith is possible...

When faith loses its focus

In times of difficulty how easy it is for us to lose focus! Abram and Sarai had answered the call of the Lord God, whom they embraced and obeyed as their new Master. By faith they obeyed and went to this new and strange place, the land of promise. They even had the faith of pilgrims, with the awareness that this world would not be their final home, as they looked forward to the eternal city (Hebrews 11:8-10). Their original faith focus was on the word of God, which is necessary for anyone who enters into a saving relationship with him.

Jesus told his enemies, who claimed Abraham as their father, that they in fact were children of the devil. In contradistinction from their unbelief, Jesus cited the focused faith of Abraham, saying that "Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad" (John 8:56). By faith Abram saw Jesus, the eternal Son of God, and trusted in him.

When our faith is focused on God's unlimited power, wisdom and love, there should be nothing to deter or even to discourage that focus of faith. And even during times of famine, of extreme difficulty, opposition and Satan's attempted discouragement of us, we must keep our focus on our Lord Jesus Christ. That's why our everyday personal worship and weekly corporate worship is so essential to our faith focus. The psalmist was tempted to envy wicked scoffers because of their prosperity and arrogance until he entered the sanctuary of God and in worship regained his proper focus on the God of perfect justice (Psalm 73:15-17).

Jesus taught Simon Peter a lesson of faith when Peter came walking toward him on the water. As soon as Peter took his eyes off of Jesus, he began to sink (Matthew 14:30). Simon Peter's enthusiasm and even his bravery have to be commended. But his problem was one of a lack of complete trust and focus in his faith in Jesus. He was distracted by the sight of the threatening waves, just as we are easily distracted by difficult circumstances around us.

John Calvin described how that in times of famine we must be focused on the Lord and his word, because our sinful nature is always inclined to doubt and to focus on our discomfort and dissatisfaction. "Whenever our expectation is frustrated, and things do not succeed according to our wishes, our flesh soon harps on this string, 'God has deceived thee'" (Calvin, 357).

Our faith must be in Christ Jesus alone. Faith falters in famine...

When we look to other sources

In the discomfort of and the threatening factors of severe famine, Abram and Sarai looked to another source of deliverance. As Joyce Baldwin remarked, Abram seemed to desert faith “in favor of logic.” She notes how logical the decision to go to Egypt would have been because during the Old Kingdom Period, Egypt was “a fabulous country” (Baldwin, 37). The most logical, the easiest and the most convenient solution for them was to go down to Egypt, a land that was shielded from the ravages of famine because of the constant and dependable irrigation from the Nile River. “...all the indications are that Abram did not stop to enquire, but went of his own initiative, taking everything into account but God” (Kidner, 116).

And during famines of all kinds we are tempted to do the logical; not that God calls us to be foolhardy and reckless with our lives, careers and families. He wants us to live responsibly. Yet, when God calls us to follow and to stay, we must obey and remain until he clearly says otherwise. Sometimes the will of God seems very illogical, and to the unbelieving world your obedience to Christ will appear foolish. For example, when God calls you to leave behind a lucrative business career; or when he calls you to remain in a ministry that seems unsuccessful and to you is personally uncomfortable. And, of course, the most foolish thing to the world is the cross of Christ. How can God save the world by the suffering and death of his Son? And we are called to take up our cross, and living by the weak power of the cross will always be illogical and even foolish in the eyes of the world. And, just like Abram, we will be tempted to look take our eyes off of the Christ of the cross and look to other sources for help, more logical ways of living in this world.

Isaiah, as well as Jeremiah and Ezekiel to follow, warned the nation of Israel against seeking help from and refuge within Egypt instead of depending on the Lord God to deliver them from the enemy nation (Isaiah 31:1; Jeremiah 42:19; Ezekiel 30:4). Egypt represented a substitute for the way of trust and obedience. The nation and land of Egypt symbolized expediency and taking the pragmatic and convenient way, contrasted with God’s way. And let me mention that the ones God warned about going down to Egypt were people of faith. And today, pastors and churches are constantly being drawn toward the land of “opportunity” and expediency, utilizing the corporate world’s methods of church growth and substituting organizational savvy and personal chutzpah for the way of the cross and for God’s way of dependence upon his power and provision.

And Abram depended on his personal cleverness instead of upon the wisdom of God. He leaned upon his own understanding instead of trusting in God with all of his heart (Proverbs 3:5-6). As they approached Egypt on their journey of faltering faith, Abram resorted to a ruse about his wife Sarai. Abram knew that Pharaoh, King of Egypt, would want to acquire Sarai for his harem and, finding out she was married, would likely have her husband, Abram, killed. (The

Pharaohs thought adultery was a worse offense than murder, evidently) So, Abram decided that Sarai would be introduced as his sister, which was a half truth. Sarai was his half-sister, the daughter of his father but not of his mother (Genesis 20:12). Remember, Sarai was about age 65. Most commentators I read indicate the cultural differences in assessments of beauty as the explanation for Sarai's being regarded as a prize for Pharaoh's harem. Unlike today in the Western culture, when a woman's beauty is often measured against skinny fashion models and movie stars, beauty in this ancient culture was measured by a woman's countenance, dignity of bearing, and outfitting (Walton 397).

So, to save his own neck, Abram very self-centeredly and cowardly resorts to this ruse, thereby jeopardizing the life of his wife, and certainly the promise and purpose of God that from Sarai' womb would come the progenitor of the nation of the people of God. Abram had to decide if he would stand still and trust in God or venture down to Egypt on his own. When we face famine in our lives, we cannot remain neutral. We will either trust God and remain focused on him and stay in his word, or we will resort to leaning upon our own understanding (Proverbs 3:5-6). Our own understanding can get us into all sorts of trouble. Just as was true for Abraham, often God has rescued me from my own folly when I've failed to trust in him and have followed my own devices.

If we resort to sources other than faith in God...

Then we suffer the consequences

And so faltering in faith means we take the way of human logic, what seems immediately expedient, but which will lead to the loss of God's blessing and of our usefulness and joy in God's kingdom. "Faith moves in the direction of peace and hope; unbelief moves in the direction of restlessness and fear" (Wiersbe, 23). There were consequences first of all in Abram's own personal peace with God. Although he seemed to prosper in Egypt, his material prosperity didn't mean divine approval, but rather was purely by God's grace (Kline, 93). And there would be consequences with Sarai, simply the way Abram put her life and certainly her moral and spiritual well-being in danger. Sarai was brought into Pharaoh's harem, and was exposed to all the inherent evils and dangers to her purity.

Sarai was spared by the Lord of any harm from Pharaoh, who, along with his entire household, was afflicted with a serious disease. Pharaoh seemed to have more spiritual sensitivity than Abram at that point, realizing that the disease was God's judgment upon him for having another man's wife in his harem (verses 17-18).

When we step outside of God's will, we not only bring loss to our peace, joy and usefulness in God's kingdom. We also bring trouble and dangers to those

around us. This is what Jonah's story tells us. When he was fleeing from the Lord, he almost brought a shipload of men on board to their deaths (Jonah 1:14-16). A professing Christian who is living outside of God's will, lapsing into ungodly behavior, brings damage to his witness that can lead his family into danger and erode the power of his testimony as the unconverted disregard him as a hypocrite. I know of colleagues in ministry who have made decisions in the flesh that led them to move to communities where immediately their children fell into rebellious behavior. We sometimes learn the hard way that the only truly safe place, both for us and our families, is within the will of God.

On the surface it appears that Abram profited from his sojourn into Egypt, as it may appear to us today when we take the way of convenience. Our text tells us all that Abram acquired in Egypt, making him very wealthy by outward standards (12:16; 13:2). But only later would Abram discover that most of what he gained in Egypt eventually gave him trouble (Wiersbe, 24f). Besides the carnal greed of his nephew Lot, who no doubt was seduced by the wealth acquired in Egypt, Abram brought along a maidservant Hagar, who was to be a source of trouble and whose offspring would be the source of ongoing conflict with the people of Israel (Schmutzer & Ross, 45).

In times of famine we must trust that God has a way to provide for us exactly and all that we need. What we try to acquire for ourselves we do so to the danger of our own souls and to the detriment of those we love and who love us. Although this is a sad chapter in the life of Abram and Sarai, there is a good conclusion because of the grace of God, and so for those who falter in faith...

The faithfulness of God is promised

In our text we see that...

Grace overrules our faltering faith

This experience of Abram's faltering faith is a warning but also an encouragement. It's a testimony to the overarching and overruling sovereignty and grace of God over our lives. I have these moments and even seasons of faltering faith, and yet in every instance I can testify of God's sustaining grace at work, even when I was not in the proper attitude and activity of prayer.

As mentioned above, Jesus prays for us, even as he did for Simon Peter, that our faith may not finally fail, and that after our faltering, there will be a return to full fellowship and fruitfulness through a life of faithful trust and obedience (Hebrews 7:25; Luke 22:31-32). Although Abram and Sarai were to suffer lingering consequences from their faltering faith that led them to go down to Egypt, God nevertheless overruled this season of weakness and momentary

unbelief, and then led them back to the land of promise. But notice, that to get them back on track...

God gives his loving rebuke

When Sarai entered Pharaoh's harem, due to Abram's ruse to save his own neck, God continued to shelter Sarai with his providential protection. As we noted above, to keep her from Pharaoh's defilement and also as an act of judgment upon Egypt's king for taking another man's wife, God sent "serious diseases on Pharaoh and his household" (verse 17). This affliction was not lost on Pharaoh, who suspected immediately that this was divine judgment. Once again, this pagan king of Egypt demonstrated more regard for Abram's God than did Abram, as he rebuked Abram for this deception and then sent him on his way, allowing Abram to leave with all the possessions he had gained in Egypt.

And so it is that sometimes those outside of faith are more willing to speak the truth than are those of us who know the Lord. I recall a formative time early in my college (university) years, when I was trying to gain the favor of the world as well as maintain my Christian commitment. As a freshman in a Christian denomination-supported college, I was enjoying acclaim as a prize recruit for the football team. I was flattered that all of the men's social fraternities were "rushing" (recruiting) me to pledge (join). This college had a strong tie with my father, who had recently received an honorary doctorate from the school, and who, as director of a neighbor state convention (association) of churches, enthusiastically encouraged students to attend this college. My father and my college president were also friends. But I was enamored by the instant attention I was receiving from the less than most spiritual groups on campus—in fact, the social crowd with a reputation for living a bit on the wild side. My older brother, who had graduated the year before, was a member of one of these fraternities and, sadly, had a reputation for wild behavior, living as a "child of moral darkness," rather than as a "child of the light." And also, many from the wild fraternity scene were my teammates on the football team.

I recall an evening in a dormitory room, when a gathering of my friends and I were engaged in a "bull session," a euphemism for meaningless gossip and braggadocio. I had already begun the pledging process to join the most socially prestigious of the fraternities, the one to which my older brother had belonged, when one of the guys in the bull session stopped me "dead in my tracks." As far as I know, Bob was not even a Christian. At least he never gave any indication of faith. But he said to me, "Roger, you will be known here at this college as either Ray Sr.'s son or Ray Jr.'s brother." I realized then that I was facing a choice to take the way downward into Egypt, representing compromise of moral and spiritual convictions, or I was going to stay in the land of promise, and identify myself with strength of convictions and clarity and boldness of witness. God graciously stirred my desire to be known as my heavenly Father's son. Through the years since college, I have been blessed to hear how God used my

stand for Christ to influence my fellow students. And the interesting thing is, there were real Christians all around me, including professors as well as students, but none of them ever spoke to me about how I was beginning to veer off course. God used a true outsider to the faith to give me his divine rebuke, which led me to a new commitment to follow and live for him.

Abram's repentance, return and restoration

In Genesis 13:1, we see that Abram and Sarai went “up” from Egypt, back to the land of promise. Repentance begins as a change of mind, issuing in a change of direction, back to God. We noted last Sunday that the call of Abram represented a new beginning with God, who was making and calling a new people to know and follow him. Now we see that with the father of this new nation there is a new beginning. God calls him back, and restores Abram to this unique calling where he can receive eternal blessing, and not just the material acquisitions he brought back from Egypt.

Appropriately, Abram goes back to Bethel, meaning “house of God,” where he worships and no doubt renews his commitment to God. Thus, the faith of Abram did not finally fail, even though it momentarily faltered. Thus may each of us be encouraged to know that Jesus always prays for us, that our faith may not fail. He prays that after the time of faltering, as with Peter, there will be a turning back and the resumption of a relationship and ministry that will be more effective than ever before (Luke 22:31-32). Perhaps also there is now with Abram brokenness, gratitude for grace and a sense of dependence upon God that he lacked before his faltering.

What motivates us to return to God, after our time of caving in to the famine and taking the way of expediency and self-direction that takes us to a “far country,” is the awareness of the heavenly Father’s love. This is what came to the mind of the prodigal son in Jesus’ parable. In his desperation he didn’t think of his father’s justified judgment against him for wasting his inheritance and possibly disgracing his father’s name. Rather, he thought of his father’s mercy, love and grace, which exceeded his expectations (Luke 15:17ff). God’s grace covers all of our sins—past, present and future. We always live beneath the cross of Jesus, whose suffering and death paid it all. Our first turning to Christ atoned for all our sin and guilt (atonement meaning “at-one-ment” with God, restored to a relationship as his child, and justified by faith, meaning I now am accepted by holy God “just-as-if-I’d” never sinned). Now, as God’s child, I have the assurance that when I falter, he is there to receive me back.

“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). Except for the lingering consequences of his faltering, God forgave and restored Abram and never brought the issue before him again. It was as though he had never faltered in his faith. And we too need to realize and remember that about the wondrous mercy,

grace and forgiveness of God. The waiting Father, portrayed in Jesus' parable of the prodigal son, is there waiting to embrace and restore and even celebrate over our return to him (Luke 15:20-24).

Conclusion:

"Now there was a famine in the land." Is there a famine going on in your life *now*? Is this a time of testing for you, a time of temptation, and your reaction or temptation has been to think, "God has deceived me!" God has misled me! Or, God has abandoned me!" Remember, our Lord Jesus Christ experienced times of severe famine, when he was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He was abandoned and forsaken in the Garden of Gethsemane, and most horribly, he endured the worst famine imaginable on the cross. Yet he trusted that the Father, who had forsaken him during those hours of eternal dereliction on the cross, would not abandon his soul ultimately, but would raise him from the dead (Psalm 16:10).

The cross and the resurrection are God's promise that he can keep our souls intact during any famine, because we are in Christ, and our lives are hidden in him and covered and sustained by his grace and Spirit.

I have had famine experiences in my life and my 47 years of ordained ministry. I have had to learn to trust God to sustain me during times of heavy testing and spiritual drought and ministry difficulty and disappointment. Nearly nine years at IBC Brussels was a season of great refreshment and restoration of joy in ministry. When we returned to the US, to an unknown city where we have been "foreigners" in a social sense, we experienced something of a "famine." We doubted if we would ever find such a sweet fellowship of believers again, who were so supportive to Nancy with her illness, and so appreciative of my ministry. With our uncertain circumstances, we needed to trust God to sustain us in a possible season of famine, and God has certainly used you good people to minister to us in these past months.

Wisconsin for me has become a place of blessing but for you it might be a place of famine. You are here by God's sovereign will. And when he calls, he provides. Your part is to remain obedient and trust him during any season of famine and trust in God's provision, and indeed he will faithfully send the abundant showers of famine-eliminating blessing. How are you doing today, right now, where God has placed you? Are you beginning sense a severe famine, "a great shortage" of material, emotional, social, financial or spiritual support? You're in serious doubt that God will keep you here, even though you know he called and led you here. Maybe yours is a spiritual famine, when there is a lack of joy, even in your personal walk with God. Now is the time to seek him as never before, and like Jacob, not let go of him until he blesses you with a new abundance of his blessing (Genesis 32:26). Or is this your Egypt, where you are

seeking your self-initiated refuge from famine? Before you fled here, you were living and serving in the place or ministry where God had called and led you. But something happened to cause a famine that made the “grass of Wisconsin” look much greener to you. You can trust that God will restore you to his will.

Those of you who are preparing to leave home for university or career, the challenge from God’s word is that you keep your focus of trust in God and to make the worship of Christ your priority (Boice, 43). There will be moments and even season of spiritual famine, when you will be without the usual support of family and your home church. It’s crucial that you stay rooted in God’s word, in personal and corporate worship, and the fellowship of Christian friends, who will encourage and support you through times of spiritual famine and loneliness.

Amazingly, the equation of the kingdom is *our faltering plus God’s faithfulness equals his restoration, blessing and the resumption of his plan and purpose for our lives*. It’s as though we never faltered in the first place. The Father always welcomes us back to “Bethel,” to once again feast at his table.

Questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:

1. Apart from a literal famine for food caused by severe drought, how would you define famine in a personal, spiritual or emotional sense?
2. Have you ever experienced a time of personal famine? How did you react? With faith? With doubt? With fear?
3. Assuming that these famine times are inevitable, what do we know from Scripture that helps us to prepare for such times of “great shortage” in our lives?
4. When Abram experienced severe famine, what was his reaction? Describe what you imagine his emotions would have been.
5. Was Abram’s focus primarily on God or on his circumstances?
6. When we venture away from the will of God, what are some of the risks to family, friends and associates?
7. How does God rebuke us when we are outside of his will? How does he call us back? How does he respond to our repentance and return to him?

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