



THE BIBLICAL CALL TO HELP FEED THE HUNGRY

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Micah Australia has initiated a new campaign called **Help Fight Famine**. I doubt that there is an Australian Christian not moved by the plight of 49 million people now on the brink of famine. Most of us know that to declare a famine is a huge step for any nation, as they must admit national failure of their most fundamental duty to protect and feed their own citizens. And we know that a famine declaration is often delayed—politicians fear that accepting the protocols to receive help from the outside world will threaten their nation’s very sovereignty. Famines often become much worse very quickly with these fears; delayed responses to declare a famine only serve to entrench and widen the innocent suffering.

We are here because of the convergence of conflict, COVID, climate shocks and now the war in Ukraine, which together have created the perfect storm for an unprecedented global hunger crisis. COVID doubled the number of people living with life-threatening hunger. At the same time, countries in the Horn of Africa have experienced four successive failed crops due to drought, and are on track for yet another failure this season. Ukraine is often referred to as the ‘breadbasket’ of the world due to its provision of sunflower oil, barley, maize and fertilisers. As these food supplies are not being exported, the poor in Yemen, Ethiopia and Sudan—countries which depend on wheat from Ukraine—are being pushed to breaking point.

Who will answer their cry of “give us today our daily bread”?

But maybe Christians familiar with Jesus’ central message that his rule is good news for the poor, and his modelling the importance of food and hospitality that includes them, have not reflected on famine. We know that the Lord’s Prayer, which he taught us, has a central proposition that we often say glibly in our glorious self-sufficiency: “Give us today our daily bread”. We forget that this is an ongoing daily prayer, as humans cannot survive on just one day’s food. We often pass quickly to the reminder Jesus made that we do not “live by bread alone”—but choose to ignore that this is *not* Jesus saying that we can live without bread. **The Gospel is more than daily bread, but it certainly is not less.** Yes, it is “forgive us our sins as we forgive others who have sinned against us”, but it is also about bread and hunger. Anything that damages the image of God in other humans, such as hunger and malnutrition, is also sinful. And likewise, anything that restores that image by meeting others’ food needs is part of God’s salvation.

So many of the Bible’s stories are set against a backdrop of famine. Why were Jacob’s descendants ever in Egypt? Because of famine. In Genesis 42, when Jacob learnt that there was grain in Egypt, he said to his sons, “Why do you keep looking at one another? I have heard that there is grain in Egypt: go down and buy grain for us there, that we may live and not die”.

So they did go, and they met Joseph. But according to Genesis 43, the famine was severe. When they had eaten all that they had brought up from Egypt, Jacob said, “go down again and buy us a little more food”. And because of this second trip driven by continuing famine, the wise Egyptian administrator Joseph is reconciled with his family and saves them as they stay in Egypt where their generations multiply.

In the New Testament, in Acts 11: 27–30, the prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. A prophet named Agabus stood up and predicted by the spirit that there would be a severe famine over all the world, and this took place during the reign of Claudius. The disciples determined that each would send relief, according to their ability, to believers living in Judea. This they did, sending it to their elders by Barnabas and Saul (Paul).

I need not remind you that many of those suffering famine are believers—that is, of the household of Christian faith—in Africa (the Sudanese, Ethiopians and Kenyans in particular). **And we have the resources, according to our ability, to send relief.**

We know of a wealth of evidence on famines in that period. The Judean famine of 46-48AD, and the Egyptian famine of 45-46AD, stand out.

But more telling is the understanding that these people of the Way were a family—and if others fell on hard times, the family would rally around. Many call this “fictive kinship”, and it is remarkable that the early church was, so soon after Jesus’ resurrection, modelling a community of such diversity. Different races, slaves and free, Jews and Gentiles, men and women, a new family in Messiah Jesus—a social experiment never imagined before. But it was grounded in the belief that God, in Jesus’ death and resurrection, had launched a new creation, a new Exodus, thus fulfilling Israel’s divine destiny. Now he was Lord of all the world, and the Abrahamic blessing would flow beyond Jews to blessing all peoples. In the Messiah, they were one family, not two (Jew and Gentile): not separate ethnicities or nations where Gentile believers were unclean sinners because they did not obey the Jewish identity markers of circumcision and kosher food. This immediately raises our particular Biblical responsibility to help believers suffering famine in other nations.

This famine and relief journey by Barnabas and Paul is the backdrop to Galatians, and to our most cherished doctrines of justification by faith (not works). I am thankful for NT Wright’s helpful reflections on this precious letter. Paul recounts this in Galatians 2: his second visit to Jerusalem in AD46 for famine relief allowed him to take a Gentile, Titus, who he insists the Church leaders in Jerusalem did not compel to be circumcised—though clearly, some believers in Jerusalem wanted this. For Paul, that would be to deny the new Exodus inaugurated in Jesus, whose last supper meal was at Passover. Now there was freedom—not slavery—to the Jewish law. Pagan-worshipping Gentiles, who were regarded as not justified by Jewish Christians (and still unclean for Jews to eat with), became part of the family. They enjoyed freedom in the Messiah. Jesus, through his death, had defeated the power of darkness that divides the human race—which is why Paul can say “I, a former Pharisee, have died to the Jewish law”.

Paul would have been encouraged in knowing that the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem needed the famine relief, even when they knew much of it came from uncircumcised Gentile believers in Antioch. He states that the one thing they agreed on in that visit was that we should continue to remember the poor. In Galatians 2:5, famine shapes the great insight that justification is by faith in the Messiah. For Paul, justification through faith is a relationship which creates community, and this divine-human relationship is a new creation, creating a new family, who live in this new Exodus under the rule of a God who wants to dwell with us. In defeating the powers of sin and death, Jesus has set us free from the need to seek justification by our virtue, thus seeing others as unclean. It is not a ticket to heaven, but an expression that God wants to dwell with us: declaring us reconciled, just and righteous, and free to enjoy a relationship of generosity and freedom.

So in this famine, we can draw on our deepest convictions and see that what we advocate—whether to the Australian Government (a package of an additional \$150 million) or to each of us to personally give—is all central to the Gospel and expressing our identity in Jesus our Lord.