

Famine and Drought

There is evidence to show that India had to suffer from recurrent famines throughout its history, and all the more so during the period of British rule. Famines frequently affected many large regions and in some years even the entire country, bringing misery and death to millions of people. Although famines were primarily caused by a failure of the crops due to extremely poor monsoon rains, the difficulties of the population got compounded by the general apathy of the rulers, lack of relief provisions, or inconsiderate measures like increased taxation being introduced at the same time.

The infamous Bengal famine of 1770 was the first to have occurred under the regime of the British East India Company, and it is said to have resulted in the starvation death of a population of ten million in that province. During the nineteenth century, famines kept on affecting different parts of the country, and millions of people died of hunger, since they had no alternative sources of livelihood.

Bengal was struck by famine again in 1866 and at the same time Orissa was also badly affected. In the following year, there was a famine in Madras, and there was a countrywide famine in 1899. The year 1918 is remembered as the year of the great Indian famine. In 1943, there was yet another major famine in Bengal leading to the death of at least three million people. India's British rulers were at that time preoccupied with the Second World War, and left the Indian farmers to fend for themselves. Whatever they had harvested was also acquired by the government in the name of the war effort, and grain trading was banned.

The Biblical references to famine therefore ring a familiar bell and the misery that it would have brought in those times can be easily imagined.

Drought occurs over a region when the rainfall has been inadequate or has not been received at the proper time. The Hebrew word for 'drought' is '*choreb*' which also means heat and dryness. There are only six references to drought in the Bible. The Bible, however, refers to famine in different contexts as many as 85 times in the Old Testament and 10 times in the New Testament. The Hebrew words for 'famine' are '*raab*' and '*rabown*' and the Greek word is '*limos*', which also mean dearth, scarcity of food and hunger.

The Bible tells about several instances of widespread and severe famines, some of them having lasted over three, three and a half, or even as many as seven years at a stretch. Moreover, many of the famines were inflicted by God himself on unrepentant people as a punishment for their sins. Not only that, famines came in combination with other plagues. So the magnitude of ruin, death and desolation would have been unimaginable. This is how God had made sure that no one would escape his wrath by any chance: *He that is far away will die of the plague, and he that is near will fall by the sword, and he that survives and is spared will die of famine. So will I spend my wrath upon them.*¹

However, God did provide protection to some people from famine. David speaks about the righteous and the blameless: *In times of disaster they will not wither; in days of famine they will enjoy plenty.*² And God himself says: *But blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, whose*

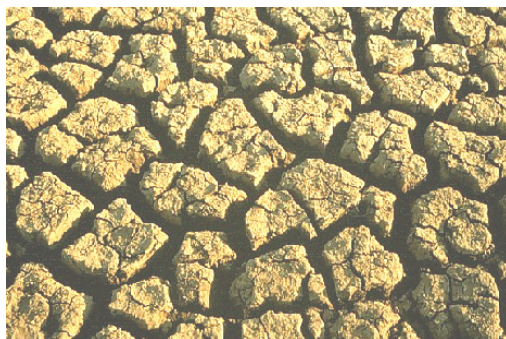
¹ Ezekiel 6:12

² Psalm 37:19

*confidence is in him. He will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit.*³

Famine is one of the many things and events that will signal the end times as Jesus himself warned: *Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places.*⁴ In the book of Revelation, we again read of death due to famine.⁵

But mercifully, we are not living in the Old Testament times nor in the end times, and so we should not be deterred by famine, or for that matter by anything fearful. In Romans 8, Paul asks this rhetorical question: *Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?*⁶ And Paul himself answers his own question, reassuring us that *nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord!*⁷



³ Jeremiah 17:7-8

⁴ Matthew 24:7, Mark 13:8, Luke 21:11

⁵ Revelation 6:8, 18:8

⁶ Romans 8:35

⁷ Romans 8:39