

**“God’s Word For God’s People”**

**1 Samuel 3:1-21**

**July 31, 2016**

**SI:** We’re studying the book of 1 Samuel.

It traces some of the most turbulent years of Israel’s history  
as the nation transitioned to a monarchy.

It’s a book that shows the failure of men, the power of God  
and what it means to live by faith.

**INTRO:** When I read stories like this, it reminds me how great the Bible truly is.

There is no book like it in all the world.

This is a story that captures the imagination of little children.

If you grew up in a Christian home and your parents read this to you when you were a child, then you know what I'm talking about.

The boy is asleep in the temple and he hears his name—Samuel.

He gets up and goes to Eli and says, You called me.

He lays down. It happens again. He lays down, it happens again.

Three times he's called. The suspense builds.

And then Eli says: It's the Lord calling you, Samuel.

Next time say: Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.

When your parents read you this story as a child, you're usually in bed.

And as you snuggle down under the covers, the thought of someone calling your name at night, that's fascinating and a little scary.

And when it turns out that someone is God, your mind and heart is opened to the idea that God might call you by name some day, and you too must say:

Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.

So this is a story that speaks to children and at the same time

it's a passage full of profound theology that's deeply instructive for adults.

It teaches us things about the word of God that are vitally important

not just for us individually, but for the health of the church as a whole.

It's clear, the theme of this story is the word of God.

There are bookends or brackets that frame this story.

Told at the very beginning that the word of God was rare in those days.

And then there is the last statement that closes the story.

Lord let none of Samuel's words fall to the ground, word came to all Israel.

This leads us down a path of theological reflection on the absolute importance

of the word of God for the life of the church, and the power of God's word,

and how his word ordinarily comes to the church through leaders he has called.

So let's look at this story that many of us have known since children

and see what it teaches us about the importance of God's word for the church.

Hopefully, will make us love the Bible more and say once again:

Speak, Lord, servant listening. Credit where credit due: Sermon by Dick Lucas.

Three points, I'll give them to you as we go.

**MP#1 God's word gives life to the church**

This story begins by describing a time and a setting when God's word was rare.

And the point is not that it was rare in Egypt or Assyria or other pagan place.

That wouldn't be a surprise.

It was rare in Israel. It was rare among God's own people.

The people looked around and could barely find the word of God.

In those days the word of the LORD was rare; there were not many visions.

Why was the word of the Lord rare? That's the question.

Barely any of the Bible had been written by that time, except books of Moses.

But that's not the reason. It's not that the word rare because Bible not written.

The clue is the word visions. Word rare because not many visions.

Visions weren't given to everybody. God gave them to prophets.

Through visions the Lord would give prophets his word to pass on to his people.

So the word of the Lord was rare because the word from the Lord was rare.

He was not speaking to his prophets very often.

And also it seems that there also weren't many prophets to hear from the Lord.

The passage doesn't tell us why, but it seems the Lord was not speaking to Israel as a sign of his judgment and displeasure.

The corruption of the priests, the corruption of worship—that's emphasis of 2.

This was the period of the judges, in Israel a time of moral corruption too.

So the Lord was withdrawing the light of his word and allowing Israel to wander in the darkness which she apparently preferred at this time.

There are other passages in the Bible that describe word of God being rare.

In Amos 8, you might remember this, he describes a famine in Israel, not of bread,

but a famine of hearing the words of the Lord. People will seek and not find.

Psalms 74 is another passage.

It describes God's judgment as the temple being burned by enemies

and that there are no longer any prophets. Prophets the conduit of God's word.

He takes prophets away from Israel as punishment.

That's how it was in Samuel's day.

This doesn't mean there were no devout believers.

There were—Hannah and Elkanah and others. But it was hard for them too.

They came to worship and got what they could. Some of it was good.

Eli knew the Lord and spoke the truth—but he was elderly and blind.

There is also another prophet mentioned in chapter 2, but God's word rare.

When I preached through Amos just a few months ago, I told you about a friend of mine in Decatur who hosted a Danish foreign exchange student.

He took her to church with on Sunday and she said: I've got to take a picture of this and send to my parents. They won't believe it. She meant the cars. She said you'd never see this in Denmark. Church parking lot full of cars. The word of God is rare in Denmark. Churches are empty shells.

Think how hard it would be to raise your children in that setting. What if your only church option was a tiny congregation with an old minister who should have retired a long time ago, but there's nobody to take his place. There's no youth director, no Sunday school classes for your kids. You say, we'll find a church with good teaching and a good youth program. Sorry! No churches like that for 100 miles. We haven't ever experienced that. We have an abundance of God's word. Lots of good preachers and churches in Cullman, America. Many ministries. But there are places like Denmark where Word of God is now rare—wasn't always like that, but now there's a famine in that land.

As Christians we must never forget God's word gives life to the church and God's word alone. We shouldn't take it for granted and think that because we have an abundance of it that it will always be that way. When the church's focus, identity, confidence is in other things, sometimes the Lord responds by making his word rare.

Catholic church's focus, identity, and confidence is in the sacraments. So in many parts of the Catholic church the word of God is rare. Not all places but many. For the Mainline Protestant church it's politics and social causes.

So there's a famine of God's word in many of those denominations. What about our tribe? The Evangelical church. All too often its focus, identity, and confidence has been in programs, entertainment and being culturally relevant. And there are places within evangelicalism where the Word of God in its fullness is increasingly rare.

Nothing wrong with the sacraments per se, or Christian involvement in social causes, or in abundance of programs and cultural relevancy.

But when those things are not subservient to the Word of God, and when the importance of God's word just gets lip service, then the church looks up one day and there is a famine.

And people wander around looking for the word of God but they can't find it. Let's be reminded—God's word gives life to the church—it's precious.

## **MP#2 God's word calls individuals to relationship**

This passage moves from the church as a whole—word of Lord rare in Israel—

to an individual. The central part of this story is about Samuel.

We're told in verse 7 that Samuel did not yet know the LORD;  
the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him.

Now that's the way the New International Version puts it.

And it seems when you read it that way that Samuel was not yet converted.

He did not yet know the Lord. He had not yet been born again.

But I think that is unlikely with Samuel. Because back in chapter 2 it says:

The boy Samuel continued to grow in stature and in favor with the Lord and with men.

He continued to grow. That indicates spiritual life from his earliest years.

That's common in the church. Most people who grow up in the church with  
Christian parents who are attentive to their spiritual life don't have a sudden  
conversion as a teenager or adult.

They are born again as little children and grow in grace and knowledge of Christ.

I remember my sister once telling my dad after she had heard a very dramatic  
conversion testimony—I don't have that. I wish I had that. Is something wrong?

My dad said: It doesn't matter as long as you know the Lord and love him.

That seems to be the case with Samuel.

As a very young child he knew the Lord loved him and had forgiven him.

But this verse does suggest a new level of spiritual experience.

Up to this point, Samuel's spiritual experience had been listening to Eli.

So when he heard the voice of God, what did he do?

He could only imagine that it was coming from his earthly master, not heavenly.

He jumped up to obey his earthly Lord, not his heavenly Lord.

\*The old standard Sunday school lesson would make a big deal about how  
obedient Samuel was, how quickly he jumped out of bed when thought Eli called.

That's not the lesson here! 1 Samuel 3 is not in the Bible for parents to use against  
teenagers who sleep too late and don't get up when you tell them time for school.

Sorry parents. You'll have to find some other Bible verses to beat kids over head.

The point here is the old relationship of dependence on Eli was coming to an end.

And a new relationship of dependence on the Lord was beginning.

Samuel was maturing in his relationship with God so that he could receive

God's word directly and not mediated through Eli.

So he's being weaned from dependence on a man to direct relationship with God.

Now let's not forget that in one sense this was a unique experience.

Samuel was a unique figure in redemptive history.

He inaugurated the great era of the prophets of Israel. He's the father of prophets.

We shouldn't expect ourselves to be spoken to out loud in the middle of the night.

But in principle, what happened to Samuel happens to every true Christian. There comes a time in your life when start to hear God's word for yourself.

You hear God speaking to you as you read the Bible.

As you come week after week to hear an exposition of Scripture from pulpit you come expecting not to hear me, but to hear God speak to you in some way. Sometimes people tell me what God said to them. I'll get an email or phone call.

As I was listening to sermon, God assured me situation work for his glory.

God told me I needed to speak to this particular person and I did and was good. One of the signs you belong to the Lord is that he speaks to you and your relationship with him grows.

For children who grow up in Christian homes, their first experience of the word of God is through their parents and dependent on their parents, or Sunday school teachers, or youth director.

And that's perfectly proper. That's how it should be.

Those spiritual authorities in our lives when we are young are put there by God to tell us what God says and what God wants us to do.

But there comes a time in the life of every young Christian when God weans you away from dependence on your parents or church leaders so you can hear his word for yourself and learn to love and obey him on your own.

I got an email this week from a man who I went on a mission trip with 35 years ago. Summer before sr. year of high school, organization called Teen Missions.

Our group had high school kids from all over America, every denomination. Out of the blue I get email. Said, If this is the Andrew Siegenthaler who went to Spain in '82, I've started a Facebook group for our team.

So Allison let me on her Facebook and there was a woman on there, a Canadian.

I remembered her well because we drew kitchen duty together.

She's a cardiac nurse now in Ontario somewhere.

She said on Facebook that during that mission trip she got news her father was having emergency open heart surgery. That news threw me into a personal dependency on the Lord I had never known. My relationship with him changed.

She was believer before, born again. But God's word mediated through parents. Suddenly, the prospect of her father being gone.

She starts reading the Bible to hear the voice of heavenly Father like never done. That's a Samuel experience.

And every single one of us must go through it.

You can't be spiritual adolescent perpetually.

You yourself have to say: Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.

### **MP#3 God's word comes through leaders—prophets, preachers, teachers**

Let's read again those verses at the end of the passage, verses 19-21.

The LORD was with Samuel as he grew up, and he let none of his words fall to the ground.

And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba recognized that Samuel was attested as a prophet of the LORD. The LORD continued to appear at Shiloh, and there he revealed himself to Samuel through his word. And Samuel's word came to all Israel.

So the famine of God's word is reversed. Word of Lord is no longer scarce.

Now there is a prophet, he's preaching, and all Israel is hearing God's word.

The last point I made is absolutely true, that as an individual believer you have to come to a point where you know and listen for and receive God's word for yourself and grow in your personal relationship and not depend on authorities.

And it's also true that that God calls leaders in his church, prophets like Samuel, and lesser leaders—teachers, preachers—to bring his word to his people.

Without them the church suffers, and when God calls them the church revives.

There are a few important things you need to know about preachers.

The first is that they are afraid to tell people the hard things in God's word.

God's first word to Samuel was a hard one. About his judgment on Eli's house.

Samuel didn't want to give Eli that word of God.

He got back in bed. When he got up to do chores, avoided him. He was afraid.

It says that. He was afraid of hurting Eli. Maybe afraid he would get angry.

That resonates with every preacher.

Thankfully Eli helped him out and said: Don't hold back, tell me everything.

Look what happened after Samuel did that.

We just read it. It says that says the Lord appeared again at Shiloh.

He came and gave Samuel another message, and another message.

What if Samuel hadn't told Eli? What if he sugarcoated that first hard message?

The Lord would probably would have quit speaking to him.

If you don't pass on what God tells you, then he won't tell you much more.

That's the case in many pulpits, unfortunately.

They're just not going to tell you the hard things in God's word,

so eventually their messages become trivial. I'm keenly aware of that.

But this has an application to every one of you, not just for me.

You are all, in some relationship in life, a preacher or teacher.

With your children, with relatives and friends, some position of responsibility.

The Lord gives you words for them. And sometimes they might be hard.

If they have to do with repentance or warning, then they will be hard.  
That's scary, but if you hold that message back or sugarcoat it, then guess what?  
Eventually the Lord will just quit prompting you, quit speaking to you.

Another important thing. Lord let none of Samuel's words fall to the ground.  
That doesn't mean Samuel was perfect and never made mistakes.

It means that when he spoke God's word everything came true.

No matter how much people might have scoffed or mocked at first.

Or no matter how grim and uncertain things were at the moment.

This is an affirmation of the absolute truth and reliability of God's word.

People can say that's stupid, bigoted, will make me unhappy, not what experts say—but your words, as you speak God's word, will not fall to ground.

It might take a long time for them to be affirmed, maybe until Christ returns.

What a confidence builder for preachers and all Christians as you speak the word.

Last, and this is most important is that comment in verse 21, easy to miss,  
that the Lord revealed himself to Samuel through his word.

He didn't reveal theology to Samuel, or future events, or sermon points.

What he was ultimately revealing to Samuel for the church was himself.

That's what we all need.

Bible preaching, Bible reading are not ends in themselves.

We don't come to church just to learn more about the Bible—

so we can go away and say I know 1 Samuel 3 better than before.

We come so that God will reveal himself to us.

How do you reveal yourself?

How do you let someone know what you are thinking?

Your feelings, your values, what you desire, what you cherish, love, hate?

By what you say.

What we need is that the Lord our God would speak to us at Christ Covenant  
and reveal more of himself to us, so that we will know him better.