

## **The Renewal of God's Word**

### **1 Samuel 3:1-4:1**

In Europe, in the early 1400s, most people didn't have access to God's word. It wasn't that God's word didn't exist – it was exactly the same word we have today. Rather, most people didn't have real access to it.

- To have your own copy of the Bible was almost unheard of. Like all books at that time, they had to be hand-copied. Thus, they were expensive. They weren't for the ordinary people.
- What's more, they were written in Latin – a language only scholars and priests understood. So even if you could actually get your hands on a Bible, you wouldn't be able to read and understand it.
- When they went to church, the pomp and ceremony was also in Latin. Thus, it didn't really matter that the priest mumbled his way through it so you could hardly hear it.
- If the priest did bother to present a sermon, it too would most likely be in Latin.

God's word was available – but in effect it was cut off from most of the population. For them, God's word was rare. It seemed God had forgotten them.

Perhaps they could relate to the situation described in 1 Samuel 3:1

*The boy Samuel ministered before the LORD under Eli. In those days the word of the LORD was rare; there were not many visions.*

As we come to this next part of the story of 1 Samuel, that's the issue the narrator puts before us. To some extent, it comes as a bit of a surprise – after all, we've just been told of God's word of judgment on Eli's house that

was delivered by the unnamed man of God. Now the narrator tells us that was something unusual at that particular point in Israel's history.

Many of us want to ask "Why?" Why was God's word rare at that point in time? The text doesn't actually say. That, of course, doesn't stop people speculating.

- Some suggest it's because God couldn't find a suitable person through whom to speak. I don't think that's likely, because God's not limited by whether or not there's a suitable person. In the book of Numbers, He used a donkey. Other times, He used angels. If He wants, He can put neon lights in the sky. He can arrange that a suitable person be born.
- More likely, I think, it's an expression of God's judgment. The end of the book of Judges shows us Israel's not particularly interested in God's word. They're more interested in doing what's right in their own eyes. Why bother giving them anything new when they aren't paying attention to what they already have through Moses? Rather, let them find out from bitter experience what life without God's word's like. Other parts of the Bible speak in those terms.

Yet here we aren't told why. As an introduction to this story, we're merely told it as a statement of fact.

Verses 2 and 3 set the scene for us. We're in the sanctuary complex at Shiloh once again – a building or series of buildings that housed the ceremonial aspects of Israel's religion (including the ark of the covenant) and also provided some accommodation for those who served in those ceremonies. We aren't told how much time's passed since the end of chapter 2. It could be a few days;

it could be a few years.

- Eli's age is catching up with him – he's losing his eyesight. He's lying down in his usual place – probably his own room within the sanctuary.
- Samuel's still a lad. He's lying down in his place – perhaps a corner in the holy place where the lamp was burning or maybe somewhere in the outer courts. We aren't told exactly.

It's still night. Dawn hasn't yet come. We know that because the lamp of God has not yet gone out.

Into the night comes a voice. Verses 4 and 5.

*Then the LORD called Samuel. Samuel answered, "Here I am". And he ran to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me". But Eli said, "I did not call; go back and lie down". So he went and lay down.*

That's straightforward enough. Samuel hears a voice in the wee hours of the morning. Naturally enough, he thinks it's Eli calling him. So, off he runs to Eli to check out what the aged priest wants. Eli tells him he didn't call, probably mumbles a few words about disturbing an old man's sleep, and rolls over in bed. Samuel goes back to his place.

The scene's repeated again. Verse 6.

*Again the LORD called, "Samuel!" And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me." "My son," Eli said, "I did not call; go back and lie down."*

At this point, I suspect they're both having rather unkind thoughts about the other. Most people don't react too kindly to having their sleep disturbed unnecessarily. Why should Eli and Samuel be any different? They're probably both muttering under their breath about the

inconsiderateness of people who disturb good dreams – except Samuel perhaps didn't know the meaning of the word *inconsiderate*.

Before the scene's repeated a third time, we have an important comment inserted by the narrator. Verse 7:

*Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD: The word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him.*

The narrator gives us a hint as to what's going on. He reminds us that this was a new experience for Samuel. His initial readers knew Samuel as a prophet – as someone to whom God spoke. You and I know Samuel as a prophet also – we've read the Bible stories before. We have grand notions of who Samuel was. We wonder why Samuel's so slow to live up to those grand notions. We judge with the benefit of hindsight. This was all new to Samuel. It's not surprising it takes a while for him to catch on – or that it needs instruction for him to catch on.

In verse 8, the narrator moves back to the story.

*The LORD called Samuel a third time, and Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me." Then Eli realized that the LORD was calling the boy. So Eli told Samuel, "Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening'." So Samuel went and lay down in his place.*

Eli works out what's going on and, as with the other areas of Samuel's life, provides proper instruction for the boy.

A fourth time God calls. Verse 10:

*The LORD came and stood there, calling as at the other times, "Samuel! Samuel!" Then Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."*

And so God appears to Samuel and speaks to him and

gives him a message of judgment against Eli's family – a message that says much the same thing as the man of God said at the end of chapter 2.

Many people identify this story as the call of Samuel. They liken it to the great calls of other people in the Bible.

- Moses meets God at a burning bush that's not consumed and is commissioned by God to go and rescue the nation of Israel from their slavery in Egypt.
- Isaiah has a grand vision of God in the temple where he volunteers to be God's messenger and is sent by God to be that messenger to a people who won't pay any attention to him.
- Jeremiah has the word of God come to him telling him that, even before he was conceived, God had appointed him as a prophet to the nations.

But if you look carefully at verses 11 to 14, you won't find God says anything like that to Samuel. There's no word of Samuel being appointed a prophet – like with Jeremiah. There's no description of God's overwhelming holiness – like with Isaiah. There's no message about the great things God'll do through Samuel – like with Moses. In fact, the message God gives Samuel makes no mention of Samuel at all. It doesn't address him as a prophet. It doesn't tell him to do anything. It just announces what God intends to do. It doesn't even tell him to pass the message on.

As I read through the Bible, one of the things that strikes me is the great variety of methods God uses to get people where He wants them.

- On occasion, He issues a call – as with people like Moses, Isaiah and Jeremiah.

- Other times He uses family lines – as when He appointed Aaron and his descendants as priests in Israel or when He chose the line of King David to rule over His people.
- With people like Nehemiah and Esther, he arranges for them to be in the right positions at the right time and to get the right pieces of information through other people.

That great variety should prevent us taking a story like this and saying this is the way it's always got to happen – prevent us from saying that when God wants to get something done, He's got to call some servant in the early hours of the morning and tell him/her what He wants done so they can then go out and do it. Some people give you the impression they think the only time God can call someone is in the wee small hours of the night – as if God's not capable of getting our attention at any other time of the day. God can do it that way if He wants – He did it with Samuel. But He's not limited to that way. Indeed, His sovereignty's so great, He can get people in the right place at the right time without even consulting with them – like He did with Esther.

But we'd better get back to the story – for the story hasn't finished by the end of verse 14. The issue the narrator put before us was in the second half of verse 1:

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

Samuel's had one vision – that alone doesn't alter the statement about the rarity of God's word. That problem hasn't been resolved yet.

Verse 15 introduces the events of the next day.

*Samuel lay down until morning and then opened the doors of the house of the LORD. He was afraid to tell Eli the vision, but Eli called him and said, "Samuel, my son." Samuel answered, "Here I am." "What was it He said to you?" Eli asked. "Do not hide it from me. May God deal with you, be it ever so severely, if you hide from me anything He told you." So Samuel told him everything, hiding nothing from him. Then Eli said, "He is the LORD; let Him do what is good in His eyes."*

Samuel's again called. This time it really is Eli who calls.

Eli's convinced it's God calling Samuel during the night and has his suspicions the message has something to do with himself. After all, he had the earlier announcement of judgment from the man of God. He also has suspicions Samuel may tone down God's message to spare his own feelings. Thus, he places Samuel under a curse if he doesn't pass on the message accurately and completely. Perhaps the curse helps Samuel overcome his fear.

Eli's statement appears to be one of submission to God. Yet, there's some ambiguity to the statement.

- He could be saying: God is God. Let God do what He thinks is right. I disagree with God about this – but I don't have the power to resist God. It's simply the submission of one who acknowledges defeat.
- He could be saying: God's judgment is just. My sons have sinned. My sons have brought shame on Shiloh and God's sanctuary. It's right my sons be judged and God remove them from office. It's the submission of one who recognises the justice of God's ways.

Yet, Eli still fails to take action against His sons. There's

no submission at that level. He doesn't say: "Yes, God's right. I must remove my sons from office at the sanctuary. I can no longer allow them to serve as priests." Perhaps that' was now physically beyond him. Perhaps his habits were so ingrained that he no longer had the ability to honour God above his sons.

Yet, once again, that's not the main focus of the story. We get to the main point in verse 19.

*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 recognised 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.*

Here's the solution to the issue raised in verse 1. The incident described in this chapter isn't the last time God speaks to Samuel. God continues to speak to Him. God now has a resident prophet at Shiloh. God's word is no longer rare.

Notice what the text does not tell us.

- It doesn't tell us the time frame. *Grew up* implies a number of years – but are we talking 5 years or 10 years or 20 years? We don't know.
- It doesn't tell us how often God spoke to Samuel. Was it a daily event? Was it every Sabbath? Was it only when something important came up?
- It doesn't tell us how God communicated. Was it audible words, like this first occasion? Was it through dreams? Was it through visions? Did he have visits from angels?
- It doesn't tell us whether Samuel could initiate

getting God's word.

We may read our answers into the text – but that's exactly what we're doing: reading our own answers into the text.

What we're told is two important things. **First**, none of Samuel's prophecies fell to the ground – that is, there were no false words. That's very important. It means Samuel passes one of the major tests of a prophet. Look at Deuteronomy 18:21

*You may say to yourselves, "How can we know when a message has not been spoken by the LORD?" If what a prophet proclaims in the name of the LORD does not take place or come true, that is a message the LORD has not spoken. That prophet has spoken presumptuously. Do not be afraid of him.*

God doesn't give false messages. It's important to be able to rely totally on God's word as spoken through the prophet. Think for a moment what it'd be like if that was not the case. Suppose God sent Israel a prophet who got it right 80% of the time. He comes up to some Israelite and says:

Next Saturday, God wants you to give all your barley seed to Mrs Smith. He promises that, if you do that, He'll give you twice as much seed next Sunday. If you don't, all your seed will be mouldy by Sunday.

Is that in the 80% that's right or the 20% that's not right? Is the Israelite supposed to act on this prophecy – or is he to ignore it because he's convinced it's in the false 20%. It's a hopeless system. God's word's more definite than a probability. The narrator tells us Samuel passes the test of being a true prophet.

**Secondly**, the narrator tells us Samuel's recognised as a prophet by all Israel. That becomes more important as

the story progresses in the following chapters. Up to this point, we've had a couple of hints about Samuel's potential future.

- Hannah's vow in dedicating her unconceived child to God hints that Samuel may be a Nazirite – someone like Samson whom God used in an earlier generation to rescue his people from the Philistines.
- Samuel's upbringing at the sanctuary under Eli's direction hints that Samuel may be the next priest – especially when we have these words of judgment on Eli and his family.
- In both the previous stories there've been hints about the possibility of a monarchy – suggesting that perhaps Samuel's role will be as king.

As it turns out, Samuel is the last of the judges. He also functions as a priest at various times. Yet, the main role God has for him is to introduce the monarchy. In this period at the end of chapter 3, God's establishing Samuel's authority as God's prophet. He's now recognised by all Israel as God's spokesman. When the time comes, he'll be able to anoint kings – both the king the people demand as part of their rejection of God's rule and the king God graciously gives them. It's through His word that God causes this to take place.

In the meantime, however, God's word's no longer rare in Israel. God's prophet is in residence in Shiloh. God announces judgment on the leadership that's not faithful. God supplies a leader who is faithful and who truly speaks God's word.

Likewise in Europe in the 1500s, God also acted to make His word freely available to people. God raised up a man named Martin Luther. Did he do it in the same way as

Samuel? No. There's no record of Luther having a visit from God one night or of him receiving some special message of judgment on the pope of that day. There's no record of Luther being appointed as a prophet of God. Rather, as a young man, Luther found himself in a violent thunder-storm one evening and made a vow to enter a monastery if the saint he prayed to would rescue him from the storm. He survived the storm and he entered the monastery. Some 12 years later, after having become a doctor of theology, he was converted through reading the Bible.

A few months later, he nailed his *95 Theses* to the church door at Wittenberg. They were a list of various things where he thought the traditions of the church had departed from the teachings of the Bible. He had no desire to leave the church. His intention was to reform the church from within. The church refused to be reformed. The church excommunicated him – and thus, the Reformation and the Lutheran Church were born.

What were some of the results?

- The gospel (God's word) was taught in the common language of the people so everyday people could hear it and understand it and be converted by it.
- The Bible was translated into German and other everyday languages so ordinary people could read it for themselves – or understand it when others read it to them.
- Sermons were a regular part of church services so people could have the Bible explained to them and could grow in their understanding of God's word.
- Church services were held more regularly – like several times a week and sometimes even daily –

so everyday people didn't have to do without hearing God's word apart from Sundays.

- Printing presses had been invented which allowed more Bibles to be produced and the cost to come down so God's word was more readily available.
- Education was made more widely available so that more people were encouraged to read so they could open God's word and read it for themselves.

Whereas before it was rare for the average person to hear the word of God, now they had a feast of it. God again made His word available to His people.

What of us today? How would God's word become rare today? God's given us His word. We have it in our hands. We have it on our bookshelves. We have it recorded on tapes and CDs. We have it sitting in our computers and available on the internet. It's freely available to all. What's more, we have God's final word to us in Jesus. As the writer of Hebrews puts it:

*In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days He has spoken to us by His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, and through whom He made the universe.*

Jesus is the Word of God par excellence.

In our current situation, God's word can only become rare to us if we fail to pay attention to it – if we fail to take the opportunity to read it and hear it and understand it. Yet, that can happen. Eli's sons had God's instructions in the books of Moses – instructions on how they were to do their jobs – yet, they paid no attention to it. They made up their own regulations about what they wanted to do with God's sacrifices. God was not pleased.

So today, despite the free and ready access we have to God's word, people can ignore it. Many people in our time ignore it because they've bought into the lie that the Bible isn't God's word. This lie comes in many forms.

- There's the multi-cultural form – which culture's arrogant enough to claim they have God's word? Isn't that simply cultural imperialism to suggest our religious book is better than yours?
- There's the multi-religious form – aren't all religions equal? Won't all religions end up in the same place? Don't all religions have a piece of the truth?
- There's the pseudo-scientific form – doesn't the Bible contain errors? Hasn't science disproved the Bible's claim? Isn't science now able to explain logically things people thought were miracles in previous generations?
- There's the humanitarian form – how can you believe in a God who judges people and wipes them out with fire from heaven and sends them to hell for eternity?
- There's the working class form – why doesn't God make the Bible simpler? It's so long. It's got difficult words? It's hard to get my mind around it.

And so it goes on – the various excuses people have fashioned to convince themselves they don't have to pay attention to this book. Effectively, for many people, God's word is rare – not because it's not available, but because they're convinced it's not important or not relevant or it may cramp their style if they take too much interest in it. Some of these things can even affect the way Christians sometimes approach the Bible.

More often, however, as Christians, we face a different

danger. It's the danger of restricting what God can say to us through His word – the danger of not allowing God to truly be God.

- For some it's the danger of too many voices. Christians have so many disagreements about how to interpret different passages and doctrines that they simply give up reading the Bible and throw it into the too hard basket.
- For others, it's the danger of always reading the Bible through the theology of their favourite preacher or their favourite author. Instead of checking out God's word themselves and what the text really says, they simply repeat what their favourite preacher says.
- For still others, it's the danger of deciding before they read what God can and can't say to them. They might decide God's not allowed to kill people for their wickedness because He's a God of love. Or God's not allowed to direct the events of history because He must grant humans their free will. Or God's not allowed to challenge my pet sins because I don't want to give them up.
- For yet others, it's the danger provided by the chapter and verse divisions. They've split the Bible up into these tiny little pieces and insist that each of the little bits has a personal message specifically for them and have ignored how to read the Bible in the way it was written.

And so that list also goes on.

We are privileged. We have God's word – and we have it in its completed form. But it won't do us any good if we don't read it. And it won't do us any good if we don't submit to it. Let's renew our commitment to do both.