

HERE I AM!

1 Samuel 3:1-4:1

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Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC, January 11, 2009

And the LORD came and stood, calling as at other times, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant hears." (1 Sam. 3:10).

We would be wrong to think that the dark period in which Samuel grew up was devoid of religion. There was a great deal of religious activity in Israel. There were priests serving and rituals observed. All of this religion went on side-by-side with widespread idolatry and nationwide debauchery. How can religion and immorality so comfortably coexist? The answer is given in the first verse of 1 Samuel 3: "The word of the Lord was rare in those days; there was no frequent vision." For all the religious activity there was no revelation from God, and without God's Word there can never be true spiritual life.

1 Samuel 3 tells of God's remedy in calling young Samuel to serve as his prophetic mouthpiece to Israel. "Now the young man Samuel was ministering to the LORD under Eli" (1 Sam. 3:1), the chapter begins. It concludes: "The LORD revealed himself to Samuel at Shiloh by the word of the LORD. And the word of Samuel came to all Israel" (1 Sam. 3:21-4:1). Thus began a new era for God's people and for Bible's unfolding story of God's redemption in the world. The imagery of this chapter tells its story: at a time when the Israel's light was burning dim, God summoned a youth whose heart was close to him, and by restoring God's Word Samuel was able again to open wide the doors to God's presence and power.

HEARING GOD'S WORD

Many of the great figures of the Bible began their careers with a dramatic call from the Lord, including Abraham, Moses, the prophet Isaiah, and the apostle Paul. Samuel's importance in Bible history is seen by his inclusion on this list of chosen and specifically called servants of the Lord.

Popular literature likes to picture a little boy Samuel answering God's summons in the temple, but it is more likely that enough years had passed for Samuel to have at least entered his adolescence. In chapter two, we read that "the young man Samuel continued to grow" (v. 26), and in 3:2 we read that Eli was now so old that his "eyesight had begun to grow dim." Whereas chapter 2 compared little Samuel to the wicked sons of Eli, chapter 3 describes him in contrast to aged Eli. While Eli is growing blind, young Samuel receives a vision of the Lord. While Eli was "lying down in his own place," suggesting a room or chamber off of the temple, "Samuel was lying down in the temple of the Lord, where the ark of God was" (1 Sam. 3:3). Samuel was in effect filling Eli's shoes, and now he would be formally installed by God in Eli's place. And just as Israel's spiritual decrepitude followed Eli's blind infirmity, now the Word of the Lord will come to Israel through the spiritual vigor of young Samuel.

The setting for Samuel's calling is provocatively stated: "The lamp of God had not yet gone out" (1 Sam. 3:3). This indicates that it was in the early hours before dawn that God called to Samuel, since the lamps were kept lit until morning. But this was also symbolically true: the lamp of God's presence in Israel was dim but not completely gone. In such a setting, the voice of the Lord was once more heard within his house: "Then the LORD called to Samuel" (1 Sam. 3:4). What grace there is in those brief words! At a time when God's Word had been violated and trampled on by even the high priests' sons, when God's injured law provided every reason for a judgment of eternal divine silence, yet still the voice of the Lord was heard calling to a child of his covenant.

And yet, in the most tragic irony, even the most devoted and most worthy of God's servants did not know his voice! "Here I am!" cried Samuel, and then ran to Eli's chamber. "Here I am," Samuel

reported, “for you called me.” But Eli replied, “I did not call; lie down again” (1 Sam. 3:4-5). The Lord called to Samuel again and the same thing happened. Verse 7 explains why: “Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him” (1 Sam. 3:7). This makes the simple point that Samuel had never heard God’s voice before, so he did not recognize it. But it also implies that since Samuel, Israel’s brightest and best, did not know the voice of the Lord he also did not really know God. While we would not say that Samuel was an unbeliever, “Samuel did not yet have the intimate knowledge of personal relationship with the Lord.”¹ This was about to change, and as always salvation would come to Samuel and Israel by the gracious call of God’s Word.

The third time God called Samuel and the youth appeared in Eli’s chamber, the high priest suspected what was happening. “Go, lie down,” he said, “and if he calls you, you shall say, ‘Speak, LORD, for your servant hears’” (1 Sam. 3:9). Thus, on the fourth summons, one given the urgency of repetition – “Samuel! Samuel!” – the young minister was ready: “Speak, for your servant hears” (1 Sam. 3:10).

The calling of Samuel not only reveals God’s grace, both in simply returning to Israel with his Word and also in his patience with Samuel’s lack of understanding, but it provides a remarkable instance of prophetic inspiration. For here we see not merely the calling of *a* prophet, but of *the first* in the long line of prophets who will serve under Israel’s kings. As such, the manner in which the Word of the Lord comes to Samuel sets a precedent for God’s revelation through the prophets.

The apostle Peter gave the classic formula of divine inspiration: “No prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Pet. 1:21). In other words, prophecy and inspiration do not begin with the thoughts of the human author but by the hearing of God’s Word. The men who wrote the Bible “spoke from God,” that is, they delivered to us the message that God gave to them. Moreover, the entire process was supervised (or “carried along”) “by the Holy Spirit.”

¹ David Toshio Tsumura, *The First Book of Samuel*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 177.

Another classic definition of inspiration was given by Paul in 2 Timothy 3:16: “All Scripture is breathed out by God.” When we say that the Bible was inspired by God, what we should really be saying is that God’s revelation was “breathed out” or “expired” from God’s own mouth. In the Bible we read God’s Word to man, communicated through his Spirit-inspired and Spirit-supervised messengers, so that the writer of Hebrews can simply declare, “God spoke... by the prophets” (Heb. 1:1). Just as God spoke to Samuel so as to provide his Word to Eli, and later to reveal his Word to all Israel, so also God spoke to all the prophets and apostles so that his revealed Word might be provided to all of us in the Bible.

The Bible shows considerable variation in the manner by which God’s messengers experienced inspiration. Much of the Bible consists of historical narratives that were written by known or unknown human authors. The psalms are poems and songs written by David and others to express their spiritual experience and devotion to God. The New Testament epistles are actual letters written by the apostles to the early churches. All of these kinds of Scripture are the Word of God as inspired and superintended by the Holy Spirit.

But here at the beginning of the prophetic era, in the calling of Samuel, we see the most basic form of divine revelation. God appears to young Samuel and speaks a message for him to record and pass on. This “dictation” approach is often denigrated in academic scholarship, as if it is somehow unworthy for God to speak to his creatures in this way. But, in fact, much of the prophetic material is presented as having been dictated verbally by God and written down more or less verbatim by the prophets. The prophets do not tell us that they have been wrestling with ideas that they now want to share with us. Instead, they uniformly tell us, “the Word of the Lord came to me” (Jer. 1:4; cf. Isa. 2:1; Eze. 1:3; Hos. 1:1; Jon. 1:1; Mic. 1:1; etc.) and “thus says the LORD” (Amos 1:3; Obad. 1:1; Nah. 1:12; etc.).

Here, God appears to Samuel in person, in a divine visitation (most of the prophets also received visions, which is why they are called “seers”), and presents a verbal message for him to pass on. This is the basic model for all Scripture, the theme on which numerous variations are played, so that in whatever form the Bible presents itself we can know that we are reading what God has committed to his

servants to be communicated to us. As such, we are duty-bound to receive all that the Bible teaches as God's own Word, carrying God's divine authority, and demanding our trusting belief and obedient response.

NEW LIFE THROUGH GOD'S WORD

The beginning of new life in Israel began with Samuel hearing God's Word. The same pattern holds true today: God's people are revived when they give their ears to the hearing of God's Word. Our own generation bears much similarity with that of Eli's: we have a great deal of religious activity, with legions of preachers, and large amounts of time and money devoted to the church and its activities. But where is the Word of the Lord? Gordon Keddie writes: "Now, as then, there is no shortage of 'religion' and certainly no shortage of clergymen! It is the revealed truth of God that is conspicuous by its absence from the theology, the preaching, and, no least, the lives of clergy and people alike."²

Today, we have what Eli and his sons did not have: the completed revelation of God's Word in the Bible. With the coming of Jesus Christ, God's revelation is completed, and the church possesses God's final written Word as we await the return of our Lord. Yet the famine of the Word of God can be just as severe for we who possess the Bible, because of our lack of interest in God's Word. Revival and reformation in the church, and in our individual lives, can only come in the same manner as it came to the Israel of Samuel's day: by the restoring of the divine Word in the hearts and minds of God's people.

An example of this truth is seen in the experience of a Chinese man named Xiao-Hu Huang, who was living in Germany with his wife, Kirstin. Xiao was a Buddhist and his wife an unbeliever. Wanting a special birthday gift for her husband, Kirstin sought a book written in Chinese, but the only such book she could find was a Chinese translation of the Bible. Displeased by her options, she nonetheless bought the Bible, hoping that her husband would appreciate the gesture. Xiao was not pleased to receive a Bible, but longing for his

² Gordon J. Keddie, *Dawn of a Kingdom: The Message of I Samuel* (Hertfordshire, UK: Evangelical Press, 1988), 51.

native tongue he began reading it anyway. As he did so, he began to be struck by the truth revealed in the Bible's pages; before long he was persuaded and began believing God's Word. This, in turn, displeased his wife, since Kirstin was a Westerner who had rejected Christianity. As they came into conflict over the book she had bought him, Kirstin began to read it too, simply to argue more effectively against her husband. But in the process she also was persuaded and became a believer in Jesus. Before long they began studying their Chinese Bible together and grew in their faith. Soon they realized that they needed the fellowship and support of other believers, so they attended a faithful church where they heard the preaching of God's Word. There, they were baptized as followers of Christ and they continued to grow as his disciples.³

This has been God's way throughout history. It was by his Word that God brought the universe into being (Gen. 1:1-26). It was by his Word that God called Abraham, Moses, and Samuel into his service, and through them that he called and gathered his people. Peter wrote that Christians "have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God" (1 Pet. 1:23). David rejoiced that God's Word is "perfect, reviving the soul"; "sure, making wise the simple"; "right, rejoicing the heart"; "pure, enlightening the eyes"; and "true and righteous altogether" (Ps. 19:7-9). This is what we have written for us to read in our Bibles: God's Word which brings life for salvation into our souls. Realizing this made John Wesley cry out: "O give me that book! At any price give me the Book of God!"⁴

SPEAKING GOD'S WORD

Essential as it is for God's people to hear God's Word, that is not enough. It is also necessary for us to speak God's Word. So it was for young Samuel, having received a message from God for Eli.

³ Taken from Bill T. Arnold, *1 & 2 Samuel*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 89-90.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 90.

Receiving God's Word created a problem for Samuel because of the content of the message, a confirmation of the judgment Eli had earlier received from the visiting man of God. "Behold, I am about to do a thing in Israel at which the two ears of everyone who hears it will tingle," God told Samuel (1 Sam. 3:11). What was about to happen would convey the fear of the Lord to the people:

On that day I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. And I declare to him that I am about to punish his house forever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them. Therefore I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be atoned for by sacrifice or offering forever (1 Sam. 3:12-14).

This statement of judgment makes some important points. The first is that God judges sin with the severity it deserves. The sins of Eli's sons were a gross offense to the Lord and his justice demanded a reckoning. It is noteworthy, however, that God's ire is directed not merely at Eli's sons, but especially against Eli himself. What had Eli done? Literally, nothing. He had not committed the sins of his sons, but he had done nothing to halt them. "He knew... his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them" (1 Sam. 3:13). This also tells us that God expects the officers of his church to oversee its affairs and ensure reverent worship that is acceptable to God.

Lastly, the Lord states that "the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be atoned for by sacrifice or offering forever" (1 Sam. 3:14). The apparent reason for this ban on forgiveness was that Eli's sons had blasphemed against the very sacrifices God had ordained for the cleansing of sin. How could they be forgiven then when they had despised God's means of grace? The same is true today for those who deny the atoning work of Christ or despise God's Word.

Like Samuel, God has given us a message that is difficult to deliver and receive. Keddie writes: "The gospel message is essentially a very hard message both to preach and to hear, because it is a call to sinners to confess their helplessness to save themselves and turn in repentance and faith to the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation through his substitutionary atonement for sin."⁵ God's message to the world

⁵ Keddie, *Dawn of a Kingdom*, 56-58.

includes his condemnation on sin, his threat of severe and eternal judgment, and his call for sinners to repent. Coupled with this hard message is God's mercy for sinners through the blood of his Son. Jesus died to save us from our sin. To be saved we must therefore confess our sin and also our complete need of the mercy of God through the cross of Christ.

Some Christians misguidedly believe that if they downplay the Bible's denunciation of sin, they are being more humble and winsome and are making it easier for people to embrace Christ as their Savior. To the contrary, however, for to remove the Bible's message of God's wrath on sin is arrogantly to tamper with the message God has entrusted to us and to cold-heartedly withhold from sinners a truth that they must embrace in order to be saved, rendering meaningless the message of the cross. Paul said that "Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom" (1 Cor. 1:22); that is, the Jews wanted God to approve them for their works-righteousness and the Greeks wanted to be saved by philosophy. "But," he added, "we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor. 1:23-24).

True ministers of God's Word will possess the same tender heart that made Samuel reluctant to bring bad news to his mentor. The Bible states that "Samuel lay until morning; then he opened the doors of the house of the LORD. And Samuel was afraid to tell the vision to Eli" (1 Sam. 3:15). Samuel did not eagerly or gleefully speak wrath to Eli. But if Samuel was truly to open the doors to God's presence and grace, then he must learn not to withhold God's Word. Eli, knowing this, called the youth and demanded, "What was it that he told you? Do not hide it from me" (1 Sam. 3:17). Eli added a warning about holding back the truth of God's Word that we all should heed: "May God do so to you and more also if you hid anything from me of all that he told you" (1 Sam. 3:17). "So Samuel told him everything and hid nothing from him" (1 Sam. 3:18). Every servant of Christ should do the same, and should thus be able to echo the words of the apostle Paul to the elders of Ephesus: "I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27).

Eli, an unhappy and unfaithful man, but still a believer, however weak, was submissively resigned to God's will: "he said, 'It is the LORD. Let him do what seems good to him'" (1 Sam. 3:18). Eli is surely a complex figure: for all of his faults he had some virtues, although the virtues seem all to have been passive ones. William Blaikie comments: "He could bear much, though he could dare little. He could submit, but he could not fight."⁶

EXPERIENCING GOD'S WORD

When God's Word returns to his people there is always a return of life. Spiritual revival always involves the hearing and speaking of God's Word. When the Word is heard and spoken the result is that God's Word is experienced with power for growth and godliness and witness to others.

So it was for Samuel. A new day had begun in his life and ministry as he began hearing and speaking God's Word to the people. The result was that "Samuel grew, and the LORD was with him" (1 Sam. 3:19). To serve Jesus Christ, hearing and speaking his Word, is to continually grow. The apostle Paul experienced the thrill of this, writing late in his life, "Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own" (Phil. 3:12). Those were not words of cynical resignation, but rather of excitement and eager anticipation. There is growth in the Lord through his Word!

If we study passages describing a Christ-like character – such as the Beatitudes in Matthew 5 or the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23 – the truth is that not one of us perfectly reflects the biblical ideal. But the exciting news is that as we walk with the Lord, abiding in his Word, we continually grow in spiritual power, purity, peace, and joy.

In addition to his spiritual growth, Samuel found that God authenticated his ministry. "The LORD was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba knew that Samuel was established as a prophet of the LORD" (1 Sam. 3:19-20). The statement that none of Samuel's words fell to the ground means that God caused his prophetic messages to come true.

⁶ William G. Blaikie, *Expository Lectures on the Book of First Samuel* (Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground, 1887, reprint 2005), 57.

Samuel as a prophet was able to speak truth to the people in a way that was valid and credible. As we grow in the Lord, hearing God's Word from the Bible and faithfully speaking it to others, our speech will also mark us as true servants of the Lord.

Finally, Samuel discovered what great things God could do through him. The chapter concludes by saying: "The LORD appeared again at Shiloh, for the LORD revealed himself to Samuel at Shiloh by the word of the LORD. And the word of Samuel came to all Israel" (1 Sam. 3:21-4:1). Through him, God's Word was restored to the entire nation. The reality is that every believer who devotes himself or herself to knowing and speaking God's Word will experience God at work through him or her in remarkable and far-reaching ways.

Jesus stated this when he described what happens when the seed of God's Word takes root in the good soil of a heart prepared by the Holy Spirit. The harvest is different in each case, but always extraordinary: "This is the one who hears the word and understands it. He indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty" (Mt. 13:23). "So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth," God said; "it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it" (Isa. 55:11).

HERE I AM, LORD

Some of us may be rightly shamed by Samuel's response when God called him. Bill Arnold rightly comments that "1 Samuel 3 is meant to arouse us out of our lethargy, as it aroused Samuel from his early-morning sleep."⁷ When God calls us, let our answer be that which Samuel spoke to Eli and to God: "Here I am, for you called me" (1 Sam. 3:5). There are callings that every Christian shares: the calling to believe in Christ, to personal godliness, to study God's Word, and to speak God's Word to the world. But there are particularly callings that God has for different individuals: to take an interest in a certain person's salvation, to meet a ministry need in the church, to leave one's home to serve on the mission field, to enter the ordained ministry, to serve as an elder or deacon, to take up the

⁷ Bill Arnold, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 85-86.

burden of schooling one's children, or to make financial sacrifices for the support of a cause, to name a few. Such callings constitute decisive moments in our lives, and our fruitfulness in life is largely determined by our willingness to repeat Samuel's answer: "Here I am, for you called me."

When I was first seeking to answer God's call to preach the gospel I was occasionally invited to speak at a Sunday gathering at the college where I was teaching. Almost every time I came the leaders were frantically seeking for someone who could play the piano. Around that time I learned that one of the regular attendees was an accomplished pianist, so I asked him, "Why do you never volunteer to play piano, when there is always such a need?" I will never forget his reply: "If I start volunteering to serve God I am going to end up in Africa. I don't want to go to Africa, so I am not volunteering for anything!" There could hardly be a surer way to keep yourself from growing and experiencing the power of God's grace than to follow this man's example. For one thing, if God wants you to go to Africa, then Africa is where God's blessing lies for you. More importantly, God is so worthy of our obedient faith, humble submission, and awe-filled worship that we will never go wrong by going where he leads us and serving as he has called.

Are you willing to echo young Samuel's words, saying to God, "Here I am, Lord, for you called me. Speak, your servant is listening"? There is every reason why you should. Paul reminds us that God has proved his good will toward us by sending his own Son to die for our sins on the cross. He reasons, "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?" (Rom. 8:32). Jesus said, "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all [other] things will be added to you" (Mt. 6:33). He added, "Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life" (Mk. 10:29-30).

These are very good reasons for us to answer God when he calls. But the best reason is the one that caused young Samuel to come swiftly

into aged Eli's bedchamber when he thought the high priest was calling: because he loved him and he delighted to serve him. The apostle John wrote, "In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (1 Jn. 4:10). The more clearly we realize how great is God's love for us and the preciousness of the gift of his Son to die for our sins, the more fervently we will love him, the more grateful we will be that he spoke his Word to our heart, and when he calls we will delight to reply, "Here I am, Lord, for you called me."