

It's Personal: the Voice/Word of God

Faithfulness of God

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This morning I want to encourage you to open your Bibles to the Old Testament, the book of 1 Samuel 3. Now, you may be a guest or visitor with us today, I want to invite you on a journey through a book of the Bible that chronologically took place about 3,000 years ago and as we sang that song about the ancient words, "ever true, changing me, changing you." One of the marvels of scripture is the fact it doesn't matter when the Lord gave it, the fact that he has preserved it, it is just as real and relevant to our lives today and one of the things about 1 Samuel, it's one of those places in the Bible that has some of the characters that are known and loved dearly, and we have obviously the prophet and the priest Samuel, who we will address today. 1 Samuel contains that famous classical story of what we know as David and Goliath but more than that, we see from the outside, we see what happens when an entity, when a community, when a culture begins this steady drift from the sacred to the secular.

At the very beginning of 1 Samuel, they are ruled by the judges, that was God's provision, that was God's plan, and yet we get about halfway through and they say, "No, no, we want to look like everybody else. We want to be like everybody else. We don't want to have any distinction or difference 'between the house of God' and the rest of the world." And yet what do we discover? In the midst of this shift, in the midst of this change, we see that God is faithful, he is faithful to those who are faithful unto him. He is faithful to those who, as we're going to see today, answer to and heed his call in their life. Today as we come to 1 Samuel 3, it's a very famous story in scripture, it's the call of Samuel. It's one of those stories that you may not realize it, but you're probably familiar with it, and even though we're going to deal with that specific call, what I really want to deal with today is the situation that led to it and the solution that God brought through calling Samuel.

1 Samuel 3 beginning at verse 1. It says,

1 And the child Samuel ministered unto the LORD before Eli. And the word of the LORD was precious in those days; there was no open vision. 2 And it came to pass at that time, when Eli was laid down in his place, and his eyes began to wax dim, that he could not see; 3 And ere the lamp of God went out in the temple of the LORD, where the ark of God was, and

Samuel was laid down to sleep; 4 That the LORD called Samuel: and he answered, Here am I. 5 And he ran unto Eli, and said, Here am I; for thou calledst me. And he said, I called not; lie down again. And he went and lay down. 6 And the LORD called yet again, Samuel. And Samuel arose and went to Eli, and said, Here am I; for thou didst call me. And he answered, I called not, my son; lie down again. 7 Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, neither was the word of the LORD yet revealed unto him. 8 And the LORD called Samuel again the third time. And he arose and went to Eli, and said, Here am I; for thou didst call me. And Eli perceived that the LORD had called the child. 9 Therefore Eli said unto Samuel, Go, lie down: and it shall be, if he call thee, that thou shalt say, Speak, LORD; for thy servant heareth. So Samuel went and lay down in his place. 10 And the LORD came, and stood, and called as at other times, Samuel, Samuel. Then Samuel answered, Speak; for thy servant heareth. 11 And the LORD said to Samuel, Behold, I will do a thing in Israel, at which both the ears of every one that heareth it shall tingle. 12 In that day I will perform against Eli all things which I have spoken concerning his house: when I begin, I will also make an end. 13 For I have told him that I will judge his house for ever for the iniquity which he knoweth; because his sons made themselves vile, and he restrained them not. 14 And therefore I have sworn unto the house of Eli, that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be purged with sacrifice nor offering for ever. 15 And Samuel lay until the morning, and opened the doors of the house of the LORD. And Samuel feared to shew Eli the vision. 16 Then Eli called Samuel, and said, Samuel, my son. And he answered, Here am I. 17 And he said, What is the thing that the LORD hath said unto thee? I pray thee hide it not from me: God do so to thee, and more also, if thou hide any thing from me of all the things that he said unto thee. 18 And Samuel told him every whit, and hid nothing from him. And he said, It is the LORD: let him do what seemeth him good. 19 And Samuel grew, and the LORD was with him, and did let none of his words fall to the ground. 20 And all Israel from Dan even to Beersheba knew that Samuel was established to be a prophet of the LORD. 21 And the LORD appeared again in Shiloh: for the LORD revealed himself to Samuel in Shiloh by the word of the LORD.

You can see a vast dichotomy between verses 1 and 21, and so how do we get there, how do we navigate the same environment that they saw themselves in 3,000 years ago? Well, we have to evaluate the situation, and one of the things we're going to discover is that our world eerily parallels the same situation that the nation of Israel, the same situation the people of God were in, and if we're in the same situation, then it also demands of us the same solution.

So what's the situation? It was precarious. Look in verse 1, it says the word of God was precious in those days; there was no open vision. What does that mean? It means that God had gone silent. It's not until verse 21 that he begins to speak again unto the people, but oftentimes it is silence that is the most frustrating, it is silence that is the most

deafening, and I can relate into our world today, it happens to every single one of us on a regular occasion, and it may even happen on a daily basis. You know the feeling, you're on your cell phone having a nice conversation and all of a sudden the signal is dropped. Do you know what's interesting is that when that signal is dropped, what's the first thing you say? "Can you hear me?" You don't just sit there and wait, hang out a few days, well, maybe they'll come back. No, in fact, we get real creative. You know, it's interesting that according to experts, the way these cell phones work is that we have all these satellites that are, you know, flying around out in space, connecting us all together, so what do you and I do? If all of a sudden someone on the other line, we can't communicate, we take that cell phone and we think that if we put it up 12 more inches, maybe that'll get a signal, or maybe if we walk around. It's amazing the things that we do when we realize that a connection has been lost. We immediately go into action so that it can be continued. Here's the irony, verse 1, do you see Eli jump into action? Do you see the people panicking, going, "We cannot hear God!"

You know, later in the Old Testament, the book of Amos 8, great prophet, says there's coming a day where there's a famine that's going to rise, not a famine for meat or drink, but a famine for the word of God. What's so ironic, and we're going to deal more with this in just a moment, is at least in this culture today, we have absolutely no excuse to claim that we cannot hear from God, and I'll address that in just a moment. You and I do not have a famine for access to the word of God. We have a famine for accessing the word of God. Did you know that the average American home, now this is average, and I realize my home skews this a little bit, the average American home has three Bibles in it. It's not that we don't have access to. This isn't Ray Bradbury's "Fahrenheit 451." I mean, this isn't dystopian literature poured out before us where we're craving. Do you know what's interesting? That the more the Bible is dismissed from the culture, the more the people want it. And yet the culture that is around us has more copies of scripture than we could ever imagine but we have to question how much are we accessing it?

It was precarious. There's no open vision. The word of God was precious. But I want you to notice this picture in verse 2 and the reason I call it a picture is I don't want to focus necessary on the physical condition, but really more the spiritual. And it said that Eli lay down in his place, and his eyes began to wax dim so he could not see. Now let's go beyond the physical here, because we all realize, we all understand that with time and with age, our eyes just tend, shall we say, to be less of what they were in days past. I can testify just this week I found out that, yes, I need to update my prescription because my eyes are not what they used to be. But verse 2 really isn't about aging, it's really not about prescriptions, it's about a priest of God, a representative of God who could not see what was happen. He could not see in chapter 1 when Hannah poured her soul out to God, he could not see that she was genuine and true. In chapter 2, when his sons were making a mockery of the sacrifice, he could not see that the people despised the Lord because of it. And here he could not see the gravity of the situation.

And I know what you're thinking, the same thing, "How could he not see it? I mean, how could he not realize what was happening with his boys? How could he not realize what was happening when Hannah came and prayed? How could he 'not get it'?" It's a question

we ask all the time. How can somebody just not see it? I've got the answer. It's found in 2 Corinthians 4:4. It says but if the gospel is hid, it is hid to those who are lost, whom the God of this world, Satan, has blinded their eyes. We live in a culture today much like Eli in the Old Testament, we've got people walking around with physical 20/20 vision, but they can't see the very hand of God in front of them and hear the very voice that is screaming in their ear. Why are we blind? Because we don't have the faculties? No. The reason for the blindness is because Satan has deceived us. Satan has convinced us there's a different way, a better way, an alternative way, whatever description you want to give. And it's not just individuals. It can also work corporately. You get to Romans 11, there's this fascinating verse, verse 25 and 26. It says let me show you a mystery that Israel, that's a collective group, right, they are in now part, they are blind until the time of the Gentiles be fulfilled. In other words, this blindness, this picture, isn't just an individual issue it can become, it can be a corporate concern, a community, a cultural issue, and the picture that we have here in verse 2 is not just a man who should have known better but we also have people who should have known better.

Then we get to verse 3. What's the product? What happens when the word of God is not present in our life? What happens when the people of God cannot discern and hear the voice of God in their life? Look in verse 3, "And ere the lamp of God went out in the temple of the LORD." Now, you may not realize the significance of what you just read, but back in the book of Exodus 25, the Lord called his people to build a tabernacle and it's a very unique construction. I mean, after all, the Lord said it had to have certain kind of skins and certain kind of colors and a certain amount of this and a certain amount of that, and there were very specifics to it. But by the time you get to chapter 27 of the book of Exodus, the lamp is lit and what it says there in verse 20 of chapter 27 is that it was never to go out. Now this is important because even though Eli is going to bed, even though Samuel is in bed, even though it has become nighttime, even though there is nobody there to sacrifice, there is nobody there to worship, the light was to remain on. In other words, the temple, the presence of God, the place of worship, was never to go dark.

You know, in Matthew 5, the famous Sermon on the Mount, remember what Jesus said? "You are the light of the world. You are a city set on a hill. No man takes a bowl and covers the light, but he lets it shine." You know, over the last 2 ½, 3 years, you and I have navigated some very interesting cultural waters. We've made our way all the way through what I guess the history books are going to call the global pandemic of the early 21st century. I don't know what the official title will be, but you and I know that for a number of weeks and months paces of worship all over the land were empty on the inside. How grateful that I am, how grateful we should be of the technology that we have accessed, that we could take into the homes, in the hospital, wherever it may be, but I want to address an issue for a moment. Now again, hear me clearly: I have no ill will against anybody or anything else in the way that they want to do some things, but you may or may not know this, for those 14 weeks every time we broadcast it from this room and from the 316 Center, we did it live. We didn't prerecord it. Now I'm not against people who did but can I tell you one of the motivating factors? Verse 3, because I knew people would be driving downtown, I knew people would still be getting out and I could not fathom the idea that on a Sunday morning the lights were not on. Even if it was just me

and a few of our technical crew, I couldn't care. We had to keep the light on. Folks, the light of the church of our culture, forget COVID, forget the pandemic, it's gone out. We have become darkened, so to speak. We have become just like they did, people walking to and fro and saying, "Well, I guess nothing is going on there. I guess there's no impact there. I guess they just turned out the lights." You see, the issue is our world is not a whole lot different than theirs. Oh, there were people inside the physical structure but the light had gone out.

So what's God's solution? What is God's solution when even the place of God, even the people of God find themselves with no open vision, of priests and pastors who can't see the hand of God in front of their face and the proverbial light has gone out? Well, guess what? God's solution then is God's solution today. He always makes provision. You say, "What do you mean by provision?" You realize in Egypt there was a Goshen and in the midst of a rebellious people, there's always a remnant. In other words, it doesn't matter how "bad it gets," it doesn't matter "how dark it gets," God always provides. He is always desiring, he is always willing, it's the "when" that gets us.

Now you read this story about Samuel and it's somewhat humorous that three times he continues to go to Eli saying, "Hey, what did you need from me?" And finally, the fourth time, you know, Eli realizes, "Maybe the Lord is calling you." But when did it take place? Not just in the middle of the night but at probably one of the most inconvenient times that we can imagine. You know, that's how God operates. That's his standard operating procedure because just when we had our plans and when we've got everything mapped out, do you know what God's really good at? Throwing us a curveball from heaven, is he not? Saying, "That's not what I had planned for you."

Do you want a good illustration? The book of Acts 9, a man by the name of Saul of Tarsus. Boy, he had a fine education. He had a pedigree that would rival anybody. He had a job that probably paid him more than he could spend. And he finds his way to Damascus. He's just going about his life, doing what he felt led to do. What happened? God showed up and God showed up in such a way, it was so inconvenient. I mean, just imagine if you can pull away from the story for a moment. I realize there's a bright light, I realize there's a loud voice, but don't you think in the back of your mind Saul's going, "Hey, I had a plan today. I had an agenda today. I had it all mapped out today. This was not a part of it, much less going to this house for three days with scales on my eyes." It was so inconvenient, and that is how God so moves when he brings the solution. It's rarely, if ever, on our time frame or according to our schedule.

So how does he do it? Same way he did then, he speaks. You know that's his pattern, right? When God put humanity in the Garden of Eden, how did we know how to operate? He spoke. He said, "You can eat of every tree of the garden freely except that one." He spoke his directions. He spoke his instructions. When humanity had gone completely sideways, he came to a man by the name of Noah, did he just drop a heavenly blueprint in his lap? No, what did he do? Spoke to him. When humanity had created the Tower of Babel and basically thumbed their nose at God, there was a man named Abraham in the

Ur of the Chaldees, how did Abraham know where to go? God spoke. And we could tell that story over and over and over again.

But in verse 21, it said that God showed up at Shiloh again and he spoke. God always provides and he does so with power. Now, when we use that word "power" biblically, it's actually where we get our modern day word for dynamite. And so when we speak biblically of the power of God, that means that God is able to obliterate an obstruction that we cannot get rid of, or he's able to seal something up that we cannot seal.

So what do we see? That God is returning to the situation, he's returning to Shiloh, his power. You say, "Well, how does that happen?" I want you to notice who God uses, a man, according to probably most people's standards completely unqualified. We're going to see this again when David is called later in chapter 16. But I want to give you kind of a paradigm. Some of you may have heard this before, but I want to relate it not only to 1 Samuel, but to our lives today. Anytime that God desires to do something among his people, he always starts with a man. He gives a man a vision. He gives a man a word. And do you know what it creates? A movement. It creates a movement of God, a revival, awakening, whatever word you want to give. And do you know what happens? If we don't watch ourselves that movement turns into a machine. We just keep feeding the beast to keep it into existence, and once that machine runs out of energy, do you know what we do? We stick up a monument and we talk about what God used to do in this place. Shiloh got real close to monument status. They had become a machine. The priests were vile. The sacrifices were despised. So what did he do? Same thing he does now. He went to a man and he said, "I need you to start a movement in my name."

So what did he do? Look at verse 21, it says, "And the LORD appeared again in Shiloh: for the LORD revealed himself to Samuel in Shiloh," listen to this last statement, "by the word of the LORD." Now, I want to address a very important issue today, not just a corporate issue, but a personal issue. I cannot tell you how many times people have come to me on a variety of issues and they say, "Pastor, I'm walking through this, I'm struggling with this. I just wish that God would speak. I just wish I could hear his voice. I just wish he would open up heaven and say this is the answer." Can I share with you the image that I get? And I'm not trying to be disparaging, it's just the image that I get, work with me for a moment. I want you to imagine that you've got a person who's crying out to God, the tears are flowing, their life has gone sideways. It didn't work out the way they planned, kind of like the song that we just heard from our choir a moment ago. And the illustration that I see is a person on their knees, on their bed, crying out, "God, please speak to me," while their Bible is on the nightstand closed. You know, it's the same situation. We have access to the words of God and some of you may have heard this joke, but it's real simple, somebody will say, "I just want to hear the audible voice of God." Then read your Bible out loud and you will hear the audible word of God.

How did God bring power? When a person of God received the word of God, the obstructions were removed, the light came back on and God moved again. So what's the problem? Do you know what the problem is? Where it took place. You say, "Why is where it took place? You would think, well, that that's a good thing, he's in the temple of

God. I mean, he's resting. There's like this parsonage that's next door and they're just sleeping." No, no. I want you to focus on where this happened. God moved, God spoke, God communicated in his place. You say, "Well, why is that a problem?" Now I'm just going to go there this morning, so just be prepared. Do you find it odd that there are a whole lot of "believers in Jesus Christ" today who spend more time trying to fix the White House than God's house? 1 Peter 4:17, "For the time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God."

Now don't get me wrong, I think God wants to fix the White House, but it always starts in his house. It doesn't start out there and come in here. It starts here and goes out there. And the problem is that means that we've got to give the Lord our time, our attention. We've got to place his word as the priority in our life. You see, this is the problem because it's always inconvenient. Let's just be honest with ourselves, church is oftentimes in our culture an inconvenient time. An inconvenient means. The very fact I know I'm preaching to the proverbial choir that you got up this morning is a statistical miracle in our culture.

That's where it starts. Why? I want you to look in verse 11 and 12, it says, "And the LORD said to Samuel, Behold," listen to this, the light have been turned off, the priest could not see, "I will do a thing in Israel, at which both the ears of every one that heareth it shall tingle. In that day I will perform against Eli all things which I have spoken concerning his house: when I begin, I will also make an end. For I have told him that I will judge his house for ever for the iniquity which he knoweth; because his sons made themselves vile, and he restrained them not." Here's the "why" of the problem, why is it a problem? Because verse 21 did not occur until the man of God, in this context, the people of God, were willing to call out the rebellion against God.

You see, you and I live in a world today where even within the umbrella of the Christendom, with even the umbrella of faith, we just want everybody to be happy. I mean, let's be honest, we just all want to get in a big circle and sing Kumbaya, but that's not how God works. What did God say? He said, "If you want the light to come back on, you've got to call it out. If you want the light to come back on, you're going to have to get together with Eli." And notice what it said about Samuel, "he feared it." I've got news for you: some of you are licking your chops right now going, "Woo! I mean, I'm ready to tee off on somebody." I've got news for you: if you're excited about teeing off on somebody, God didn't call you to do it. What did Samuel do? I'll tell you what he did, he stayed up all night. He didn't sleep at all because the last thing he wanted to do was say, "Eli, we've got a problem and it's you. We've got a problem and it's here." The only way we're going to get the light turned back on is to do it God's way.

And then you get to verse 21 again, "the LORD," listen to this, he "appeared again in Shiloh: for the LORD revealed himself to Samuel in Shiloh by the word of the LORD." If there's one thing that you may or may not be aware of that we have as a distinct advantage in our culture is that we have numerous times over the last several centuries, we have been visited by the flames of revival. We have had moments and we have had times where we have sought the Lord more than we sought power or position. We have

had times where we were more interested in "thus saith the Lord" than what saith the news.

What does it say? He appeared again. You see, here's the great news is that in the midst of a proverbial Egypt, there's always a Goshen. In the midst of a rebellious people, there is always a remnant. And in the midst of a house of God that the priests could not see, and the lights had been turned out, there was still a Samuel who said, "God, I'll do whatever you've called me to do." And he appeared again.

You see, the story of chapter 3 is an entity, a people, who are on the brink of destruction and God spoke and Samuel listened. The question is this: when he speaks, will we listen? He has spoken, will we obey? We are in the same situation as they were but God's solution has not changed.

Let's pray with their heads bowed and our eyes closed. Today as we come to our time of response, I realize that all of chapter 3 was pretty corporate based, but maybe you're that individual today who say, "You know what? The light of my life has been off for a long time. I've been wandering to and fro." And though you may not have used it in the same context as the Bible, would maybe today you say, "You know what? I'm just lost and I don't have any answers." Here's the great news: the Bible says whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. You say, "What happens when I'm saved?" It means your sins are forgiven, and if you'll allow me to use the analogy, it means God turns the light on in your life. And maybe today you're that person, maybe you're here in person, maybe you're watching online, maybe you're listening on the radio, wherever you are, you say, "You know what? I'm tired of the darkness. I'm tired of the lostness. I'm tired of the wandering. I need some direction. I need some guidance. I need the light of Jesus Christ in my life." I've got great news: if you'll call out today, he will forgive and he will save. If you're that individual, can I encourage you, you don't have to say the same words that I would say, you don't have to necessarily repeat verbatim what I or somebody else would guide you, this is your heart's cry but maybe your heart's crowd go a little something like this, "God, today I want to confess and admit what you already know about me. I've got a sin problem. God, I've been places I should have never been. God, I've done things I should have never done. God, I've spoken words that should have never left my lips. And God, you know there have been thoughts between my ears that only you are aware of. Your Bible, your word says the wages of the result of my sin is death and I deserve it, but it also says but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ, our Lord. And God, today I'm desiring that life, I'm desiring that light not because I deserve it or I can earn it, but because Jesus Christ has paid the price for it. God, today, I believe, I believe that Jesus Christ loved me so much that he came on my behalf, he lived a sinless life on my behalf. God, I believe that when he allowed himself to be nailed to the cross, he was bearing the punishment of my sin and, God. I believed that three days later when he rose from the grave, he made it possible, he made it feasible for my sin to be forgiven and my soul, to be saved. God, today I don't have the answers to all the problems that are out there but I do know that Jesus Christ is the answer to the sin problem inside of me. So the best way I know how I'm asking you to forgive me, I'm asking you to save me. I just want to turn my life over to you."

With our heads still bowed, our eyes still closed, maybe you're that person today who had that conversation with the Lord. In a moment, I'm going to pray and we're going to stand and sing together. I want to invite you just to step out and step forward. We've got a whole team of individuals who'd love to just hear your story, pray with you, and pray for you. But maybe today, you say, "You know what? I'm already saved. I called out to the Lord years ago." Maybe today's about following in believers' baptism that we'll celebrate in other services today. Maybe it's about becoming a part of this incredible body of believers. Or maybe, just maybe you say, "Pastor, I've got all that covered." It's not about stepping out and stepping forward, it's about in a few moments stepping out of this place and desiring to hear the word of God more than any other voice in your life.

Lord Jesus, as we come to this time of decision, thank you that, God, that at least from our perspective you should have given up on us a long time ago. But you haven't. You should have discarded us years ago. But you haven't. You desire, just like you did in Shiloh, you desire to appear and to speak again. God, today may we not take this opportunity for granted. May we heed your voice in our life. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.