



Part 6 – No Falling Words

1 Samuel 3:1-4:1a

In the days of the Judges, the people were not used to hearing the voice of the Lord. Given their habit of sinning from one generation to the next and the dissolute condition of many of the priests, it is not surprising that the Lord withheld his voice. Chapter 3 is the account of the Lord calling young Samuel to be his prophet. It is a fitting answer to Chapter 2 in which the Lord rejects the house of Eli. Samuel, trained and ministering before the Lord as a priest, will now take the role of prophet.

Although the Lord has chosen to judge Eli and his progeny, his promise to preserve a righteous line in Israel remained. The rise of Samuel signals that the Lord is going to begin speaking to his people once again. From north to south, Israel will know that the Lord is speaking through Samuel the prophet.

A Famine In the Land

Vs. 1 – “...And the word of the LORD was rare in those days; there was no frequent vision.” – These words describe the devastating condition of Israel in those days. In Lamentations 2:9 we read, similarly, of a time in Israel that, “the law is no more, and her prophets no longer find visions from the Lord.” The prophet Amos writes, “‘The days are coming,’ declares the Sovereign Lord, ‘when I will send a famine through the Land – not a famine of food or a thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the words of the Lord’” (8:11). In our age, we are blessed to have the completed written Word of God in our hands. Nevertheless, when that word is ignored, neglected or not faithfully preached, then a similar situation would prevail (and often does). The times of refreshing and revival that are about to burst forth in Israel will be the direct result of the return of the Word of the Lord.

Vs. 2 – “At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see...” – The Scriptures often draw a line of connection between physical and spiritual conditions. Here, the writer uses Eli’s failing sight to indicate his diminished spiritual sensitivity as well as the spiritual darkness over the land.

God Breaks His Silence

Vv. 3 – “The lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the LORD, where the ark of God was.” – The large menorah in the sanctuary would be given enough oil to burn through the night until dawn. The Lord’s lamp not having gone out is likely also a reference to the fact that God’s light had not entirely departed from Israel. Indeed, Samuel would be the one to make that light burn brightly again.

Vv. 4-10 – “Then the Lord called Samuel...” – The little boy being trained as a priest was now, in adolescence, being called as a prophet. God was speaking to, and in turn will speak through, Samuel. Eli’s use of “my son” (vs. 6) to refer to Samuel reveals the fondness he had for his young assistant. This fondness is in contrast to the grief his own sons had caused him.

(Vs. 7) – “Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him.” – The “did not yet know” is in contrast with “did not know” used in 2:12 of Eli’s sons. The ignorance of Eli’s sons was a sinful lack of knowledge. Their ignorance was due to their hardness of heart. Not so with Samuel. That he “did not yet know the Lord” was no indication of unbelief. Rather, it was entirely due to the Lord not yet having spoken to him. That was now changing.

Vv. 11-13 – “Then the LORD said to Samuel, ‘Behold, I am about to do a thing in Israel at which the two ears of everyone who hears it will tingle.’” – Here the Lord speaks directly to Samuel and repeats the judgment pronounced upon the house of Eli. “Tingle” is used to refer to the sort of physical reaction that is often experienced when particularly shocking news is heard. The sons of Eli had repeatedly demonstrated utter contempt for the Lord’s sacrifices and had practiced such gross immorality that their actions constituted blasphemy against the Lord. For this, the law of God required the highest punishment (Leviticus 24:10-16). While Eli did not commit the sins of his sons, he was complicit by refusing to restrain them or remove them from the priesthood.

Vs. 14 – “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.” – There is no atoning for the sin of rejecting God’s grace. There is no sacrifice left for those who treat with contempt the sacrifices of the Lord (Hebrews 10:26-31).

Samuel the Prophet

Vv. 15-17 – “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.” – The sanctuary at Shiloh was the tabernacle (a tent). The reference to “doors” could simply refer to canvas or linen drapes. Many scholars believe, however, that by this time the tent likely had been supplemented with more sturdy features such as doors and walls constructed of wood. Whatever the case, in a passage that directs us to read the details with an eye for a deeper meaning, Samuel opening the doors to the sanctuary shows that he is now going to serve as a mediator between God and the people.¹

Vs. 18 – “...It is the Lord. Let him do what seems good to him.” – Eli properly recognizes the sovereignty of God’s will, but there seems to be a tragic resignation on his part. Would it not have been better for Eli, after hearing these words of judgment, to cry out to the Lord in repentance? It is certainly true that the Lord will do what he knows is best, but God has often sovereignly used an announcement of judgment to stir people to repentance. Think of Moses’ zealous intercession when the Lord told him he would not accompany the people into the Land of Promise (Exodus 33:12-23).

No Falling Words

Vs. 19 – “And Samuel grew, and the LORD was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground.” – Following his first experience as a prophet, Samuel continued to grow. The Lord’s presence is the chief blessing of the Old Covenant. There is no greater state of blessedness than to have said of you, “the Lord was with him.”

The final clause may be more literally (though clunky in English) translated, “did not cause any of his entire words fall to the ground.”² Samuel’s words will be the Lord’s words for the Lord will give him prophetic revelation. This is a sort of revelation that was unique to the prophets in that they repeated the very words the Lord had spoken to them (Amos 3:8; Jeremiah 20:8-9).

“So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth. 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” (Isaiah 55:11).

“...knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone’s own interpretation. For 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 Peter 1:20-21).

Vs. 20 – “...from Dan to Beersheba...” – This is a bit like someone from the U.S. saying, “from coast to coast.” From north (Dan) to south (Beersheba), the Lord opened the eyes of his people such that they understood that Samuel was his prophet. The Lord’s word has the power to unite his people.

Vv. 21-4:1a – “And 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.” – In response to the crisis in Israel, the Lord gave them what they truly needed: his word. The famine was finally over. The Lord was speaking to his people once again, and the word of the Lord would go out to all Israel. This was an act of sheer grace on the Lord’s part. All the great revivals described in Scripture and experienced in the church’s history have the recovery of the Word of God at the center.

Throughout this passage, the essential nature of God’s Word is highlighted. God mediates his presence with his people through his word. Apart from God’s Word we would be lost in our ignorance. Without God’s Word we would not know the gospel of salvation in Christ Jesus. We would not know the message of the cross. Read Psalms 19 and 119 for an idea of how good it is for God’s people to have his word.

The account of the Lord speaking to Samuel is not meant to teach contemporary believers that they can expect the same sort of direct revelation. Indeed, the writer of Hebrews states, “Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, *but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son*, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world” (1:1-2). God’s greatest Word to us was his eternally begotten Son; the Word made flesh. And it is in God’s written Word that we hear him speak.

¹ V. Philips Long, *1 & 2 Samuel* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2008) p. 68

² David Toshio Tsumura, *The First Book of Samuel*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007) p. 183