

# 1 Samuel 3:1-4:1a

## Introduction

It was great to hear from Vince earlier. If you hadn't met Vince before, he would have been a stranger to you - before this morning, you wouldn't have known anything about him. So, it was really good to hear from him. And now you *do* know something about him because, a few minutes ago, he told us about himself - we know a little about who he is, what he likes and what he thinks is important, because he's told us. We know what kind of books he likes to read. And the kind of films he likes to watch. And if you want to get to know him better, you could speak with him after the service and find out more.

We get to know who people are and what's important to them by listening as they tell us about themselves. That's true in all areas of life. It's true of parents we meet at the school gate. It's true of new colleagues at work. It's true of neighbours who move onto our street.

And it's true with God. We get to know who God is and what's important to him in the same way... by listening to him. And that's what our passage this morning is all about.

Perhaps, at times, you've felt frustrated that God seems to be silent. Perhaps you've sometimes said to yourself, "I wish God would say something. I wish he would tell me that he's there and that he cares about me." And yet he seems to be silent.

That's how our passage this morning begins. It begins with silence.

So, let's look at our passage together. It's a story from many centuries ago in the ancient history of Israel. But as we look at it now, we'll see its ongoing relevance to our lives today.

And I've put as our first heading that God wants his voice to be heard.

That's our first heading: God *wants* his voice to be heard.

## God wants his voice to be heard

Please look down again at chapter 3, verse 1. It says this: **The boy Samuel ministered before the LORD under Eli. In those days the word of the LORD was rare; there were not many visions.**

Here's the problem: God's voice is not being heard in Israel. There's silence.

We're not told why that's the case. But clearly something was wrong.

This was a dark period in Israel's history. The nation was in moral chaos. The people were living as they pleased, doing as they saw fit, and paying no attention to God. Perhaps that's why his voice wasn't heard.

Those who had been appointed as priests, who were supposed to be mediators between the people and God, weren't doing their job. They were abusing their power and exploiting those who came to them. Perhaps it was their failure that led to God's voice not being heard in Israel.

Whatever the reason, something was wrong.

Elsewhere in the Bible it says that: **...man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.** (Deuteronomy 8:3)

We're not merely physical beings. We are all spiritual beings as well. We were not made to live merely on the level of our physical appetites as animals do. We were made to live in personal relationship with our Creator. And we all have a deep need to hear our Creator speak to us. Just as we need food to live physically, we need God's word to live spiritually.

So, this situation in Israel can't be a situation that God likes. And these opening verses give us hope that he would do something.

Eli was the high priest in those days. Yet in verse 2 we're told that he was very old, and that his eyes were so weak that he could barely see. His failing eyesight is perhaps a symbol of the spiritual condition of Israel as a whole. The Israelites could barely see their way spiritually. They were descending into darkness.

But verse 3 tells us that the lamp of God had not yet gone out. That might just be telling us that it's nighttime. But all the while there's light, there's hope.

So, when we're told about the boy Samuel, lying down in the house of the Lord, where the ark of God was – in other words, lying down in God's presence – we expect something to happen. And it does.

I love this story.

While Samuel's lying down, trying to get to sleep, he hears someone calling him. Assuming it's Eli, he rushes off to see what he wants. "Here I am," he says. "You called."

Eli, probably half-asleep himself, and a bit confused by Samuel's sudden appearance by his bedside, sends him away again. "It wasn't me," he says. "Go back to bed." And Samuel trudges off.

Again, as Samuel tries to sleep, he hears someone calling him. "Samuel!" Again, he throws off the covers and runs to Eli. "Here I am," he says. "You called." "No. It wasn't me," Eli says, and sends him back to bed again.

It happens a third time. "Samuel!" Once again, Samuel appears at Eli's bedside. "You called," he says. And finally, it dawns on Eli that it must be God who's calling Samuel. So, he tells him what to do should it happen again and sends him back to bed one more time.

Well, we might appreciate the slight comedy value of the story, but we need to understand what's happening here. To grasp that, we need to look at how the story ends. Look on to the end of the chapter, to verse 21.

It says this: **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.**

Do you see?

God is addressing the problem that the chapter started with.

We started with silence. God's word was not heard in Israel.

We end with God's word coming to all Israel. The silence is over.

And God does this through Samuel.

God's calling Samuel to be a prophet, to speak God's word to the people. And that means, first, that God needs to make himself known personally *to* Samuel.

That's what we're being told in verse 7. **Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD: the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him.**

Although we've been told already that Samuel was growing in stature and in favour with the Lord, he doesn't yet have personal knowledge of God. He might well know lots of information *about* God. But that's not enough. He doesn't yet know God himself. Before he can be a prophet to the nation, he needs to have his own personal relationship with God. And that can only come through God speaking to him.

God brings each of us into relationship with himself by speaking to us.

He is a speaking God.

We read in the first book of the Bible – the book of Genesis – that God commanded the universe into existence by speaking. The account of creation begins with these words: **And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light.** (Genesis 1:3). God speaks and things happen. His words are powerful

He teaches his people how to live by speaking to them. The book of Exodus contains the Ten Commandments, which the Bible introduces by saying, **And God spoke all these words:...** (Exodus 20:1)

And he calls us into relationship with himself by speaking to us.

That's what he's doing for Samuel, here. He calls Samuel a fourth time. "Samuel! Samuel!"

This time, Samuel answers. And God speaks to him in a vision. Perhaps surprisingly, what he wants to say to him is to tell him of the judgement that's coming on Eli's family because of their sin, which we heard about last week. And then Samuel goes back to bed until the morning. I'm not sure how much sleep he would have had!

This might seem like a strange thing for God to say to Samuel. But God is wasting no time in training him how to be a prophet. And we see that as soon as morning comes. The next morning Eli calls to Samuel and wants to know what God had said.

Look at verse 17. **'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.'**

Samuel must now behave as a prophet should. He must speak God's word fully, without holding anything back, or else face judgement. That's the role of a prophet. This is Samuel's on-the-job training. He's got to learn fast. Which he does. He tells Eli everything. And Eli's is a model response. He receives everything Samuel says without resisting it. He acknowledges it and accepts it. He may have had his faults, but he still manages to submit to God's word when he hears it.

So then, Samuel's been called as a prophet.

He's been trained as a prophet.

And verse 19 tells us of his rise as a prophet in Israel. Look at it with me.

**The LORD was with Samuel as he grew up, and he let none of Samuel's 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.**

Again, we mustn't miss what's happening here. The story begins with silence. And it ends with God's word coming to all Israel, calling the people back to God.

This story isn't primarily about Samuel. It's about God.

It's telling us that God knows that people need his word to live. And that he cares about us too much to leave us without it. He wants people to know him personally and to listen to him. He wants his voice to be heard.

He accomplished that, back then, through Samuel - Samuel was one in a long line of prophets who brought the word of God to Israel.

But as we read on in the Bible, we discover that God has spoken to us, now, in a far greater way. He has spoken to us now through his Son, Jesus Christ... which is our next heading: God has spoken by his Son.

## God has spoken by his Son

The Bible says this:

**In the past God spoke to our ancestors 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 also he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.** (Hebrews 1:1-3)

God is a speaking God. He has spoken in the past in many and various ways – through visions and dreams and so on. But now he has spoken to us in a way that is unlike anything that has gone before and is far superior. He has spoken to us, now, by becoming a man and living among us in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ.

These verses say that Jesus is **the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being**. In other words, when we look at Jesus, we see God. God has made himself known to us in Jesus.

There's an old story of a primary school teacher whose class was doing art one day. As she went round the classroom observing the children, she asked one girl what she was drawing. "I'm drawing God," she replied. "How can you be drawing God?" the teacher asked. "No one has ever seen God. No one knows what he looks like." The child looked up at the teacher, held out her piece of paper and replied confidently, "They do now."

The message of the Bible is that we don't need to look at a child's drawing to know what God is like. We need to look at Jesus.

Everything that Jesus reveals about his Father is fully consistent with everything that has been revealed before. He doesn't contradict it. Yet now, through the life and teaching of Jesus, God has made himself known to us in a full and final way. Jesus is God's greatest word to us.

The way to hear God speak to us is through Jesus.

The way to know how God wants us to relate to him is by listening to Jesus.

The way to know God's will and purpose for our lives is by listening to Jesus.

And that means expecting God to speak to us, today, through the pages of the Bible.

We see and hear Jesus in the Bible.

When we read the Bible, we're not reading a book like other books. Though it contains stories that point us to Jesus, we're not reading fiction, like the kind that Vince and many others enjoy. Though it records things that Jesus said and did, we're not reading a reference

book that we might go to merely for information. The writer to the Hebrews says that the Bible is living and active.

When we read it, God engages with us through it. He speaks into our lives. And God's words are powerful. They penetrate deep inside us.

So, we're not in the same situation as Israel in the days of Samuel. There's no longer a famine of God's word. God voice is not silent today. He speaks to us clearly through his word, the Bible. At a time when the Bible is freely available to most of us, from a bookshop, from websites online, as an App on our phones... that means that God's voice can always be heard.

If we want to hear God's voice addressing us, we mustn't expect, much less demand, that he speaks to us as he did Samuel and other prophets – through dreams and visions and spectacular signs. We must listen to him address us in his word.

And I think there are three important implications of that for us today.

Here's the first.

If you're a Christian, you need to be committed to studying the Bible and living by it. Man does not live by bread alone. We need to be feeding daily on God's word. The Bible contains everything we need for a godly life, if only we will read it.

Second.

If you're a Christian, you need to be committed to sharing the contents of the Bible with others, so that they too can hear God speaking to them. Like Samuel, we need to do that fully, without holding anything back. God wants his voice to be heard. And, of course, people need more than just information about God. They need to have a personal encounter *with* God. So, as we share the contents of the Bible with others, we need to be praying that God will open their ears to hear his voice addressing them.

Third.

If you wouldn't yet call yourself a Christian, God wants you to know him. He wants his voice to be heard. And his words in the Bible are for you as much as anyone else. Read the Bible for yourself. Have an open heart and an open mind. And pray that God will make himself known to you as you do.

Let's pray.

Loving Father, thank you for making yourself known to us by your Son, Jesus Christ, through your word, the Bible. Please help us each of us here to know you as you truly are and to live as you made us to live, in humble dependence on you. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.