

Sermon 4: 1 Samuel 3:1-21: Samuel the Prophet

OUTLINE

The judgement of no prophet
The call of a prophet
The ministry of a prophet

INTRODUCTION

What is the worst thing that could happen to you? If we ask this question of God and of an unbeliever we would get two different answers. The unbeliever would answer, 'The worst things that could happen to me are my loss of freedom, restrictions on my speech, choices, desires.' War, debilitating sickness, the death of a child, unfaithful spouses, poverty, these and other physical afflictions would likely rate highly on the list. But if you ask God what are the worst things that can happen to you the answer would be very different. Where the world values libertarian freedom to whatever your heart desires, Romans 1:24-27 tells us that God punishes those who deny Him by giving them up to their sins without fear or conscience. John Lennon in his song portrays the ideal world as a world without religion, where there are no churches, preachers, people standing up to tell you what's right or wrong. According to the book of 1 Samuel, the lack of the word of God is not a sign of progress but darkness and judgement.

You probably remember 1 Samuel 3 from your Sunday school lessons as a good lesson on how to be a good little boy or girl, ready to listen and do what God says. This certainly is one of the ways we can apply this chapter, but we must not miss the significance of this chapter as a time of darkness where God in His faithfulness breaks into that darkness and appoints a prophet to expel the darkness. So today as we consider the appointing of Samuel as prophet we want to think about the judgement of no prophets, the calling of a prophet and the ministry of a prophet.

The judgement of no prophet

3:1-3, 'Now the young man Samuel was ministering to the LORD under Eli. And the word of the LORD was rare in those days; there was no frequent vision. At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his own place. 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 description of the times in this chapter is nearly poetic. Many commentators have pointed out the ironic inclusion of Eli's blindness as a type of illustration of Israel's condition, a living demonstration of the words, 'there was no frequent vision.' Some have also suggested that the words, 'the lamp of God had not yet gone out,' is not merely a way of referring to the time of early morning, but suggestive of the spiritual state of affairs. Apart from these allusions to how things were, we have clear indication in the way this chapter is bracketed by references to God's word of how things were and what God is doing. We can see in verse 1 that prophecy was a rare thing, this heightens the significance of the prophecy against Eli's house at the end of chapter 2. And by the end of the chapter we see a very different picture, we see a prophet installed and active, we see God moving in the midst of His people once again, v19-21.

This was the sort of change that was experienced at the time of the Reformation. Under the Roman Catholic church, the church only received the odd homily, the mass was in Latin and intelligible and there was a profound lack of the word of God. These are truly hard times,

Amos 8:11-12, "Behold, the days are coming," declares the Lord GOD, "when I will send a famine on the land—not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD. They shall wander from sea to sea, and from north to east; they shall run to and fro, to seek the word of the LORD, but they shall not find it." Proverbs 29:18 tells us the consequences, 'Where there is no prophetic vision the people cast off restraint, but blessed is he who keeps the law.' Spiritually speaking the reformation ended the Dark ages, not merely because there was no growth in human learning but because there was a lack of God's word. So when the Reformation came and the people rediscovered the bible there was a boom of preaching God's word. Zwingli has morning and evening services everyday. Calvin preached 6-8 times a week. It was a time of great blessing as it was a time of the word of God present among the people. Let me make a plug here for having an evening service, I know it is becoming more and more unpopular, this is in part due to a low view of the Lord's Day, but it is also due to a low view of preaching God's word. If judgement is a lack of God's word, why would we keep ourselves from those times when God's word is being preached.

I can hear someone say, 'But Nick if a lack of prophecy is the judgement shouldn't we be seeking the gift of prophecy today?' I answer no. We no longer live in the day of apostles and prophets, Eph. 2:20 tells us that the apostles and prophets are the foundation of the church. During the OT and the first century of the NT through the apostles, the foundation was being laid for the church, it consisted of a message. We cannot add to the foundation, we do not need new revelation because all that needs to be said with regards to the foundation has been said. We live in the age of the evangelists, pastors and teachers, we are not here to make the message but to faithfully hand it on. So on the one hand we can agree with the Puritans who called preaching prophesying. Not because it was a fresh word from God but because it was the faithful proclamation of the given word, a repeat of the original message and so entitled to the name.

Is there a famine for God's word today? I believe so. It is being improved on certain fronts, we are seeing the New Calvinism with its emphasis on the primacy of preaching and being gospel centred, and being committed to expository preaching making real head way. But in our entertainment oriented culture, in a day when people are wanting more community and less preaching, in a day when unchurched the church has been the recent agenda of the Emergent church, false theological reasons for minimizing God's word in the church are alive and well. 2 Tim. 4:2-5, 'preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. 3 For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, 4 and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. 5 As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.'

This however does not mean that are not individually starving, it is true that we have bibles, books, mp3s, podcasts and many other ways of accessing God's word, but many are sitting at the table and not eating, and those who eat are not necessarily digesting through meditation. There are many ways to hinder God's word in our lives. We need to be submerged in the God appointed way for Christians to be receiving God's word, at church. We need to be reading our bibles and enjoying the benefits of info available, but we must ensure that we meditate upon it. We need to revive our passion for the bible, listen to John Wesley who was passionate for God's word:

'I am a spirit come from God and returning to God; just hovering over the great gulf, till a few moments hence I am no more seen—I drop into an unchangeable eternity! I want to know one thing, the way to heaven—how to land safe on that happy shore. God Himself has condescended to teach the way: for this very end He came from heaven. He hath

written it down in a book. O give me that book! At any price give me the Book of God! I have it. Here is knowledge enough for me. Let me be *homo unius libri* [a man of one book].'

The call of a prophet

We turn now to consider Samuel's call to prophetic ministry. We see him sleeping in the tabernacle near the Ark. This would not have been in the Holy of holies, but in other rooms reserved for priests. V4-5, 'Then the LORD called Samuel, and he said, "Here I am!" 5 and ran to Eli and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call; lie down again." So he went and lay down.' God calls Samuel, but Samuel does not yet know God is calling him, and probably as he was in the habit of doing, he got up to help Eli who likely needed his help from time to time begin old and visually impaired. It has been pointed out that Samuel's general demeanour is one of a servant. He did not know it was God who was calling him but he still says 'Here I am.' He was not revealing himself in a game of hide and seek this is a way in which one said, 'I am available to serve.' You will appreciate his willingness to serve if you have ever tried to get your teenager out of bed in the mornings. God called Samuel a second time, v6-7. Both times he readily went to Eli to serve but was sent back to bed. After the third time Eli cottoned on to what was happening, v8-9, 'And the LORD called Samuel again the third time. And he arose and went to Eli and said, "Here I am, for you called me." Then Eli perceived that the LORD was calling the young man. 9 Therefore Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie down, and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant hears.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place.'

The strong notes on obedience and servanthood are important ones in our day. Today we test a thing's legitimacy by seeing what it has in it for me. Christianity can be portrayed as you being self-realising superstars who have God as a life coach. Here is the great king anointing prophet, the one who casts the mould for the prophets. He is a simple willing servant who lives to do another's will. There is no negotiation, no complaining at the pay or work hours, no arguments over inconvenience, no hesitation or bartering, just simple humble submission. When Jesus spoke about coming as a child, it was this humble, submissive attitude that He was including in His definition of childlikeness. Living as entitled people and not servants is evident in our complaining, our expectations of us being better served, anger at God when He does not fulfil our wishes, when we grudge others being acknowledged and not us, all reveals our self-serving hearts. Samuel's humble submission is a good lesson for us to learn and the necessary posture of any servant who wants to serve God's people. Samuel's lot was probably a difficult one, he was away from family, he was at the beck-n-call of a blind old man, but we must recognise God's providence. Samuel was learning how to lead and how not to lead as he served in Eli's house. He had an inside line on being a judge, and an inside line on what God disapproved of. His faithfulness in little was his preparation for the larger tasks that would lie ahead of him. He reminds us to embrace our present difficult serving places and trust to God's providence to be at work in the difficulties to be a preparation for harder and more fruitful fields of service.

V10 is the formal call of Samuel, 'And the LORD came and stood, calling as at other times, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant hears.'" As with Moses when he was called to be a prophet Samuel's name is called twice, Ex. 3:4. But we also see that God appeared in a theophany in Samuel's presence as well. The calling of God of a prophet was very important, nearly every prophet gives an account of how he was called. This call ratifies his ministry and gives credit to his words. This is why Paul so often mentions his call. There are no prophets called today. Those who claim a call like Joseph Smith are liars, deceived or self-deceived. We do speak today of a call to the ministry but it in no way

implies that preachers have the same authority as prophets. The call to the ministry is not a theophany but a Spirit led prompting to God's eternal design for a man's life. Notice I said man's because women cannot be elders in a church. Generally speaking a call to ministry today has four aspects to it. Firstly, according to 1 Tim. 3:1 there needs to be an inward desire for the ministry. Many have mentioned how this desire is overwhelming and swallows up all other desire. If you try to do anything else this keeps pressing to the forefront. Secondly, there must be the gifts that attend the call, gifts of teaching, knowledge, discernment, compassion and other things fitting you for the ministry but still allowing for individuality, 1 Tim. 3:2. But he must not only have the abilities for the ministry but the character as well. This character must be tested in the home and his life generally, inexperienced men cannot be ministers. Paul makes these points in 1 Tim. 3:1-8. Finally a call must not only be a personal conviction but evident to the church, and they ratify and enable that call by releasing you for ministry in the church. It is not as dramatic as Samuel, but the Lord is still in the business of calling men into His work. I have to ask, are you called?

The ministry of a prophet

Samuel's first task as a prophet outlines for us the difficult calling of a prophet. The prophet always takes God's side, even if it is against family and friends. He has to grow up fast as he is confronted with the sins of his surrogate father and called to repeat the hard word of prophesy against Eli's family. Vv11-13, '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. 12 On that day I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. 13 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. 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.'" God's first action to deliver His people is the act of removing the terrible leadership of Eli and his house. Perhaps Samuel would have thought to pray for mercy, but God announces that there can be no reversal of this judgement, no sacrifice can be offered to change His mind. Again we have it emphasized that Eli knew of the sin, had the power to stop it but loved his family more than God. In his position his neglect amounted to public blasphemy. God was misrepresented as having laws that protected evildoers and enabled predators and extortionists. God was not represented as holy to the people, now God will prove His reputation by removing Eli. Think of Samuel, think of all the love he would have received from Eli, think of his age and how hard it would be for him to say such difficult words, yet this is the calling of every prophet, this is the calling of every child of God when it comes to the truth. We are called to be witnesses, we are called to testify to the truth of man's guilt before God, the extent of his sinfulness and great need for Christ. We are to tear down self-deceptions exposing false philosophies and lies that harbour unbelief of any type. We have a hard task like Samuel's but the Lord is with us till the end of the age to strengthen us in it. He has given us promises about giving us words to speak. We see examples of God granting prayers for boldness for witness. We know that the Spirit has been given to convince and give the increase. Yet for all these aids it is still our responsibility to give the hard word. We are not to give a hard word for its own sake seeking to provoke a reaction. No we do not try to offend, we are faithful messengers and let the truth offend. We ought to be winsome and kind, we should be above reproach and not gloating.

Samuel no doubt did not get back to sleep and would have been waiting in trepidation for Eli to come seeking him out. Eli puts him under oath expecting the word to be one of judgement, perhaps he knew what it would be about. And his reaction is quite anti-

climactic as he resigns himself to judgement. One would have expected more tears or repentance or at least an attempt to pray for mercy, v15-18.

The portion concludes with the striking reality that where there was no prophet there is now a prophet, where once there was a famine for God's word, now God is speaking. This is the beginning of how God brings about His will, He opens a way for His word. V19-21 point out that God is with Samuel, just as God was in the tabernacle; that Samuel's words were not allowed to fall to the ground, because this is the nature of biblical prophecy it is not mixed with error but fully true being like God's truthfulness and proving His reality. We see a universal acknowledgement of Samuel as a prophet, and the Lord present at Shiloh in the midst of His people. What would have appeared to be a time when God has abandoned Israel or was absent is now ended and we are on the precipice of something new.