

God's Word is not rare

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[0 : 0 0] Well, during the week, or last week, I think we were trying to carve a pumpkin. Has anyone! ever tried to carve a pumpkin? Yeah, it's pretty tricky, but I was chatting to somebody during! the week and they were telling me that they were at a pumpkin carving party some years ago, and somebody at the party got the idea that they could put a blindfold on the person who was carving the pumpkin and then the others at the party could direct their hand and tell them up up a bit down a bit with the knife and carve the pumpkin in that way. Now, I don't know what way the pumpkins looked at the end of that, but you can imagine as far as I know everyone came out of it alive, but if you want to carve a pumpkin properly, if you want to know what the pumpkin is going to look like, you need the blindfold taken off. You need to be able to see and it's the same if we want to know God properly. We need the blindfold taken off. We need him to take the blindfold off us. We need him to bring us out of darkness into light to make himself known to us.

And so this morning, if you're here and if you don't know God and if you're wondering what is he like, you need him to take the blindfold off. You need him to make himself known to you.

And if you're here, as many of you are this morning and you know God, and if you would say to somebody, I know God, don't just settle for knowing him.

Think of what Paul says to the Ephesians, I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the spirit of wisdom and revelation so that you may know him better. So that you may know him better. We may know God, but we want to know him better. We want to know him more. And so we need God to make himself known to us. And what goes on in this passage is that God is taking off the blindfold so that people can know him.

And let's have a look and see what happens and how that happens. And what we see first of all is simply that God makes himself known. And then we'll see that he makes his plans known. And then we'll see that he makes his prophet known. But first of all, it's very clear in this passage that God makes himself known. The scene is set for us in verse 1, where we see the boy Samuel ministered before the Lord. And then down in verse 3, it says, the lamp of God had not yet gone out. And Samuel was lying down in the house of the Lord, where the ark of God was. And so the scene is set for us. We're in the house of the Lord. We have the ark of God. We have priests like Eli. We have guys like Samuel who are serving and ministering before the Lord. You have the sacrificial system. Everything is set up.

[3 : 0 2] Everything that has been given by God so that the people at that time would know him. And yet there seems to be a problem in verse 2. And the problem is this. Sorry, at the end of verse 1.

The problem is this. In those days, the word of the Lord was rare. There were not many visions. In other words, God was not making himself known. So they would have had the earlier parts of the Bible as we now know it. But what you realize here is that you can have all the bits and pieces, the temple, the ark, the priests, and so on. But unless God is making himself known, he will not be known.

Unless God speaks, unless the word of the Lord is there, then God is not heard. God is not seen. God is not known. And this reality is symbolized by how attention is drawn to Eli in verse 2. Eli, whose eyes were becoming so weak that he could barely see.

And Eli's physical blindness in this case is being highlighted for us because it is a parallel to the spiritual blindness that is going on for Eli and for others at that time. And so the scene is set.

God, his word is rare. There were not many visions. In other words, God was not being seen. And then the curtain goes up, as it were, in this scene. So God makes himself known intentionally now. In verse 4, the Lord called Samuel. God is the one who calls Samuel proactively, intentionally. You realize that if God doesn't open his mouth here, then they won't hear him.

[5 : 01] And if he doesn't choose to open his mouth, nothing and nobody can force him to. But he does. God makes himself known intentionally, intentionally here. That is his intention.

He also makes himself known humbly. The Lord called Samuel, of all people. Samuel is just a boy. Samuel is just one of the helpers in the temple. And it is to Samuel that God speaks. It is to Samuel that the Lord of all creation speaks. This boy who is fast asleep in the temple is the one who God humbly chooses to speak to. It reminds me of a hymn that John Calvin wrote that has this lyric.

Thou hast the true and perfect gentleness. No harshness hast thou and no bitterness. Reflecting on this humility of God that it would be to Samuel of all people that he would speak.

He doesn't go to the great and the good. He goes to Samuel. And he speaks clearly in verse 5. Samuel answered in verse 4. Here I am. And he ran to Eli. Here I am. You called me.

And you can imagine Samuel, just after being woken up by this voice and the hair sticking up on the back of his head maybe and bleary-eyed and maybe foggy in the dark heart to see. And what he has heard is this voice clear as a bell through the fog, through the darkness. So clear that he thinks it is Eli who has spoken. God speaks clearly and he speaks so patiently. He speaks so patiently. In verse 4, the Lord called Samuel. In verse 6, again, the Lord called Samuel. In verse 8, a third time, the Lord called Samuel. In verse 10, the Lord came and stood there. What did he do? Called, as at the other times, Samuel. Samuel. The patience of God in calling Samuel. And even when Samuel is mistaken in verse 5 and he runs to Eli and says, here I am. You called me. And in verse 6, Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, here I am. You called me. And in verse 8, Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, here I am. You called me. God is so patient. Even with Samuel's mistaken identity, even with the confusion. As Eli says, I didn't call you. Go back and lie down. In verse 5, as he says, I didn't call you. Go back and lie down. In verse 6, the patience of God as these guys figure this out. But he doesn't give up on them. He doesn't walk away from them. He doesn't say, I'll go and find somebody who has it all together and knows the story. The reality is that Samuel didn't know the Lord yet. In verse 7, it says that Samuel did not yet know the Lord and we're told that as an explanation, not to blame

[8 : 13] Samuel, but to explain. I mean, how often does the Lord come and speak to somebody like this? It was rare, even in those days. And yet God calls him, speaks to him, makes himself known patiently. He makes himself known powerfully. This is powerful. This is powerful. You know, sometimes when God speaks to us through the Bible, through his word, it can be like dynamite, the change it can bring about in our lives instantly. And sometimes it can be a sword slicing silently through our motivations.

Sometimes it can be like a seed. And you're wondering, is anything going on? But in each case, the word of God is powerful, always achieving its purpose, even with a sleepy, confused Samuel.

If God wants Samuel to be his prophet, then God will get Samuel to be his prophet. And so God speaks, makes himself known powerfully. And yet it is all very personal in verse 10.

The Lord came and stood there. Now, what does it mean that the invisible, everywhere present God of the universe came and stood there?

It means at least this, that where God's word is, God is. That where God's word is, God is. That God powerfully attends to his word when it is read, when it is preached. He powerfully attends to it to achieve its purposes, to achieve his purposes. That he is personally present as though he is standing there. He is standing there because his word is there, as he calls Samuel.

[10:19] We have this analogy from human relationships. If a man and a woman say the words to each other, I do, on their wedding day, they're not just words, they're promises that enact the covenant relationship of marriage. This is as one author puts it. The couple is doing or intending something by their words, which are inseparable from them. In a far greater way, what is true of humans is true of God. God cannot be separated from his words. To obey God's word is to obey him. To reject God's word is to reject him. Whenever God speaks, he himself is there with us. So when we gather with his word at the center, he is there powerfully speaking to his people. To know his word is to know him.

And so God makes himself known through his word intentionally, humbly, clearly, patiently, powerfully, personally. And the question is, will Samuel hear him? Verse 9, Eli realizes Samuel needs to hear. So he told Samuel, go and lie down. And if he calls you, say, speak, Lord, for your servant is listening. This is crucial that Samuel would listen. And you realize, as this all unfolds, that a new era is dawning because we're moving now from the word of the Lord being rare to the word of the Lord coming clearly to Samuel. No longer are they carving pumpkins in the dark. Now the blindfold has been taken off. God is making himself known as he calls this prophet Samuel.

Now we're not Old Testament Israel. We're not prophets. I'm not a prophet. You're not a prophet. This is a non-prophet organization. Sorry, that was terrible. We're not in the temple. There isn't an audible voice. But God speaks to us through his word. We have it here. Everything that God wanted for us to be written down, what Samuel heard from the Lord, what Ezekiel heard from the Lord, what Isaiah heard from the Lord, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul. We have his word for us. It is not rare.

It is here for us. And it is intentional that God chose to do this. And it is humble just as he approached Samuel humbly. There is a humility to this. I can close this and walk away from it.

That's incredible. But it also means it is humble. There's nobody too young or too old that God will not speak to them as they open his word. Nobody too rich or too poor. It is clear. There are parts that are hard to understand. But just as clearly as God spoke to Samuel, he speaks to us clearly through his word. And it is powerful, sometimes like dynamite, sometimes like a sword, sometimes like a seed. And we wonder, I've read this and I don't feel any change. But that word grows and grows and grows, doing exactly the work that God would have it do. And God speaks to us through his word patiently, repeating himself to us over and over again. How many times, how many ways does he show us who he is, what he is like, what we are like, through the Psalms, through the Proverbs, through the history, through the prophets, through the Gospels. And it is personal. When we open the Bible, when we come to hear

[14:14] God's word preached, it is personal. The Bible wasn't written directly to us first day, but it is for us. It is for God's people. And it is not rare. This is all you can eat. This is all you can eat. We were at a restaurant years ago called Ishiban, which I'm pronouncing badly. It was an all-you-can-eat restaurant.

And you give a tenner at the door, and then you can go up with your plate, and you can bring it back to your chair, and you can eat everything on your plate, and then you can go up again with your plate, and fill it again, and eat it again. Or, if you've a bit of common sense, you'll go up with two plates at the start. You fill them both, and back you go. We have a feast laid out for us in God's word. The word of God is not rare for us. I asked somebody during the week, what were they reading in the Bible? And sometimes I ask people that, because I'm interested to know what they're reading in the Bible, and whether I might learn from how they read their Bibles. This guy pulls out his phone. He shows me the five Bible apps that he has on his phone that help him with different aspects of reading the Bible. Then he said to me that he has two Bibles at home, one in English, and one in his first language. And he reads them side by side, so that he can understand and make sure that he's understanding it well in English as well.

And then he said that he has a number of preachers that he will listen to, that he knows they will preach the word faithfully on his phone. And then he said to me this, I wake up with the word, and I go to sleep with the word. And I thought, wow, I'm supposed to be the pastor here, and you are showing me what it looks like to be hungry and to feed on God's word. It's all you can eat. There is no lack of food here that we might know God through his word as he speaks humbly and clearly and powerfully and patiently and personally through his word to us. There is no lack of food. The word of God is not rare.

The question is, how is our appetite? How is our appetite? And so God makes himself known to us. Second, God makes his plans known, and they are frightening plans.

Verse 11, the Lord said to Samuel, see, I'm about to do something in Israel that will make the ears of everyone who hears about it tingle. And in verse 14, he says, therefore, I swore to the house of Eli, the guilt of Eli's house will never be atoned for by sacrifice or offering. These are ear tingling plans.

[17 : 11] As you see this unfold over the next couple of chapters, you realize the implications of this, not just for Eli and his sons, but for all of Israel at that time. I remember being at Electric Picnic, which was this big music festival up in Strad Valley in Leash, and as you were walking into the concert, the music was so loud that it actually felt like your internal organs were vibrating in the same beat as the bass drum.

And when you left there, your ears were ringing for days afterwards because of the magnitude of the music that was being played. And God is saying, I am going to do something that is going to leave people's ears ringing, not because he's speaking so loudly, but because of the plans that he is going to carry out towards Eli and his sons. This would have been shocking for them, the significance of both Eli's sons, this priest's sons, both dying in one day, and Eli himself realizing that God will not be mocked.

God will not be mocked by these men. These are frightening plans, plans that he has told them about. In verse 12 he says, I spoke already to Eli about this.

I have warned Eli already about this. And you'll remember, if you have been with us in chapter 2, that what he said to Eli was perfectly fair, perfectly just. He reminded Eli how he had brought Eli's family out of Egypt, the great love and kindness that God had shown to Eli and his line, his ancestors over the years, over the generations, how he had chosen them as priests, given this incredible honor to serve in his temple, how he had provided for them so that they would never be in need of a bite to eat as they went about their work, how kind he had been to them, how loving he had been to them, how they had blasphemed against him.

In verse 13, his sons uttered blasphemies against God. They had lived self-indulgent lives, did whatever would make them happy, sleeping with the women at the door of the temple.

[19 : 41] And you can imagine, if you remember, the way they took the meat out of the pot by force, if necessary, from the sacrifices that the people were bringing, you can imagine the way they treated the women.

As we saw last week, people's response, people's response in Israel would be, praise the Lord that he's going to bring this to an end. We have been too badly hurt, too badly abused by these men.

Praise God that this is coming to an end. Justice will be done. Here's the tragedy for Eli and his sons. This was avoidable. These plans were avoidable.

In verse 13, God says Eli failed to restrain them. What's the implication? He could have restrained them. He could have stopped this before God put a stop to it.

He had spoken to them. He had argued with them about the sexual sin they were committing. But then he went along with the self-indulgent lifestyle, the self-serving lifestyle.

[20 : 48] There was no real conviction, no real heart in what Eli said. God says it could have been put a stop to. These plans were avoidable. And they were avoidable.

And they were avoidable because I've given you the very system that you needed to come back to me. The sacrifices, the very system that you were disrespecting. That even with all this sin, you still could have come back to me and acknowledged that you'd gone wrong, presented your sacrifice, sought my forgiveness, and I would have received you back.

But what did they do with the sacrificial system? They threw it back in his face. They rejected it all. I don't need this. I don't want this. And so God makes his plans known to them.

And they are ear-tingling plans. Years ago, I was renting a house as a student. And a couple of doors up, there was other students renting a house.

And in the winter, they started to get cold. And rather than turning on the heating, they lit a fire in the fireplace. And so what they would burn in the fire was any bit of wood that they could find.

[22 : 06] And so what they did, this was a house they were renting from a landlord. What they did was, first of all, they forced one of the doors off its hinges, broke it apart, and put it on the fire in their sitting room.

And then they forced another door off its hinges, broke that apart, put it in the fire to keep them warm through the winter. Then they saw that the stairs, the banister at the stairs, was made out of wood, so they broke that off, put it into the fire.

Then they realized there were some bits of furniture they weren't using, so they broke those up, put them into the fire. This is how they treated the house that they were renting. If you were the landlord, would you give them back their deposit?

Of course not. God had given Eli and his family a house, not bricks and mortar, but this generations of promise as priests who would serve the Lord and his people.

And here's what they did with it. They threw it back in his face. They lived as they wanted. They took what was not theirs. Enjoying the food that was not theirs.

[23 : 14] Having sexual pleasure outside of marriage with multiple partners that was not theirs. And there was still a way back. There was still a way back, but they threw that in his face.

And you know, lots has changed since then, but the human heart is still the same. You know, God has been kind to each one of us. We've experienced his love and his kindness. Everything we have is from him.

Everything we have is from him. He is so kind. He is so loving. He is so gracious. For God so loved the world.

God loves the world. God loves this world. And when that is said in John's Gospel, what it means is God loves this fallen place, this sinful place, this dark place. God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

Isn't that amazing? It is like the landlord with those students who had burned down most of the house, saying, I forgive you, and I'm going to give you a better house.

[24 : 28] And you think, wow, what kindness. God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

We have a far greater sacrifice than Eli's sons had in their day. The son of God has been given for us. If we follow the lead of Eli's sons and treat Jesus with contempt or disrespect, God has told us the plan.

He has told us the plan. He has made his plan known to us, this frightening, ear-tingling plan, that to disrespect and treat Jesus with contempt, this great sacrifice that was given out of great love for us, God has told us what will happen.

But here's the amazing thing. This is an avoidable plan if you turn to him in repentance and faith. If you say, God, I have got it wrong.

God, I have treated you with contempt. But I need Jesus. And God will say, I forgive you. I accept you.

[25 : 46] You're mine. And you know, many here have done that. Many here trust Jesus with their lives because he has given his life for them. And our ears tingle in a different way when we hear this because we think, only for the grace of God, this is where I would be.

Like Eli's sons. We think there was a time when I treated Jesus' sacrifice with contempt, couldn't care less. But now we think, I couldn't imagine anything worse than to hear words like this from God.

This is what I've been saved from. And what I've been saved to is the eternal life that Jesus has bought for me. And so God makes his plans known.

Lastly, let's reflect on how God makes his prophet known. I wonder what was Samuel thinking about in verse 15? He lay down until morning and then opened the doors of the house of the Lord.

What was he thinking as he lay there and stared up at the temple at the ceiling? He has just met the Lord and the Lord has given him this message to give to Eli, who, remember, is his boss, is his supervisor.

[26 : 56] Consider Samuel to be a son. Verse 16, Samuel, my son. And now, Samuel has to tell Eli what he has just heard from God.

Eli might totally flip out. How dare you? I've taught you everything you know, Samuel, and you stand there in your little linen ephod and you think you can talk to me like this.

Get out of here. Or it might drive Eli to despair to hear this message from Samuel. Samuel, my son, I'm heartbroken.

Well, here's the choice for Samuel. The Lord had called Samuel and Samuel said, here I am. And now Eli is calling Samuel. And Samuel says in verse 16, here I am.

And Samuel is afraid to tell Eli this vision, to tell Eli this word from the Lord. And you can feel the tension, can't you? Do I say what God has told me to say?

[28 : 03] Or do I keep quiet and not say it to Eli? Well, Eli realizes and says to Samuel in verse 17, what was it he said to you?

Eli asked. And as Eli asked that question, what's hanging in the balance here is whether Samuel is going to be the kind of prophet who tells people what they want to hear or whether Samuel is going to be the kind of prophet that you can trust that he will say what God says even if it is hard to hear.

And what goes on in Samuel's heart here as Eli says this to him is Samuel chooses that he is going to respect God above all else.

Eli says to Samuel in verse 17, 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.

You see what Eli is doing there is he's not threatening Samuel with his own discipline or something like that or his own fear. Wait till I get you. He's saying, no, may God do to you ever so severely.

[29 : 13] And it's a kind of a complicated little phrase to translate, but essentially what it's saying is this. If you hide from me what God has said to you, may God hide from you his message, his word, at least.

And that's a thought that Samuel can't handle. The idea after having met with the Lord, having heard from the Lord, the idea that now the Lord's word would be hidden from him is enough to ensure that Samuel says to Eli exactly what God has said.

said, verse 18, Samuel told him everything, hiding nothing from him. Samuel had been one who did not know the Lord, who did not hear from the Lord, and now he knows the Lord and hears from the Lord and he wants that above all else, no matter what Eli says or how he treats him.

And so he tells Eli everything. And as he says that, you realize here is the making of Samuel in a sense, as a prophet, as one who hears the word of God and who speaks the word of God to whoever it is in front of him.

And so God establishes him in verse 19, the Lord was with Samuel as he grew up and let none of Samuel's words fall to the ground and all Israel, from Dan to Beersheba, recognized that Samuel was attested as a prophet of the Lord.

[30 : 51] The Lord continued to appear at Shiloh and there he revealed himself to Samuel through his word. So what you realize has happened now in this chapter is we've gone from a situation where the word of the Lord is rare to a situation where the word of the Lord is being proclaimed through Samuel on a regular basis and it sets the scene in a sense for the rest of the book.

But it also sets the scene for the rest of the Bible because God would continue to speak through his prophets until a day when he sent a greater prophet, the greatest prophet.

You know, Samuel and the other prophets in the Old Testament, they spoke the word of the Lord but when Jesus came, he is the word of the Lord. What does John say about Jesus?

In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God. The other prophets spoke the word of the Lord. Jesus is the word of the Lord. This is the way the author to the Hebrews speaks about Jesus.

In the past, God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets many times and in various ways and that was good when he did that. But in these last days, he has spoken to us by his son.

[32 : 12] The son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being. And so when we reflect on Samuel and how wonderful it is that God spoke to this boy and appointed him to be a prophet to speak his word to the people, we need to realize that that was then and this is now.

And what we have now is Jesus, the word of God made flesh. One implication of this is that if you come across somebody who is claiming to be a prophet in the way Samuel was a prophet, you need to be very, very careful.

I came across one during the week and I didn't go looking for it. I was chatting to somebody, a friend in a shop in town and they mentioned to me a church that they were getting connected with, getting involved with and I looked up this church and I looked up who was leading this church and it turns out he's not in Cork, he's far away and he goes by the name of Major One.

His followers refer to him as my father, my prophet. He wears fine clothes, he's a great smile and he has four private jets and it's confusing because he talks about Jesus.

He will talk about Jesus. Here's what the BBC said about Major One. On a regular Sunday about 40,000 people will gather to hear the prophet preach and potentially pick up some of the specially designed merchandise on sale at stalls dotted around the large church complex.

[33 : 55] Anything from miracle oil, calendars and wristbands to branded towels, t-shirts and caps all emblazoned with his face. And when he was asked about his wealth and his prosperity here's what he said.

My prosperity is an inspiration for my followers. They think if God can do it for me, he can do it for them. What does Jesus say about following him?

Jesus says if anyone wants to follow after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me. You know, true prophets like Samuel in times past pointed to Jesus at all costs.

Samuel did that, Isaiah did that, Ezekiel did that, John the Baptist did that. And what did Jesus say about John the Baptist? Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist.

So what does John the Baptist do? Start churning out the merchandise with his face on it? No, he says, Jesus must become greater.

[35 : 10] I must become less. If you come across somebody who claims to be a prophet and they are the center of attention rather than Jesus, be very, very careful.

God has already sent us his word in the flesh. His name is Jesus. There is no one greater. There is no one else that we need. If you want to know God and if you want to know him more, you can.

We have his word to us. It is complete. It is finished. It is final. And in the Bible, God makes himself known. He makes his plans known. He has made Jesus known.

It's all here. It's all you can eat. I don't know if, like me, sometimes you go to this all-you-can-eat buffet and you come away with a couple of celery sticks on your plate and you wonder, why am I not satisfied?

God has provided everything that we need so that we might know him and know his plans and know Jesus and know him more.

[36 : 20] And so the question for us as we go through this week is are we hungry? Have we an appetite for God? And our prayer now is that we would have that more and more.

so let's ask God to help us with that. Heavenly Father, we want to thank you and praise you that you have made yourself known to us. And Lord, we love that we know you, but we want to know you more.

And Lord, we acknowledge that the reason that we don't know you more at times is because we don't turn to your word. We don't spend time in it. Father, thank you for your kindness and graciousness that you are patient, that you are personal, Lord, that you speak clearly to us and we pray you would increase our appetite.

Father, that this would be a week where we feed on your word because man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from your mouth. And Lord, help us that we might know you more through your word.

It's in Jesus' name that we pray. Amen.