

...to bring revival

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Preacher: Marcus Evans

[0 : 00] Our first reading today is Psalm 95, which is on page 599 in the Bibles. O come, let us sing to the Lord. Let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation.

Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving. Let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise. For the Lord is a great God and a great King above all gods. In his hand are the depths of the earth. The heights of the mountains are his also. The sea is his, for he made it, and his hands formed the dry land. O come, let us worship and bow down. Let us kneel before the Lord, our maker.

For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture and the sheep of his hand. Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day in Massa, in the wilderness, when your fathers put me to the test and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work.

For forty years I loathed that generation and said, they are a people who go astray in their heart, and they have not known my ways. Therefore I swore in my wrath, they shall never enter my rest.

Our second Bible reading can be found on page 274, 1 Samuel chapter 3, verse 1 to chapter 4, verse 1.

[1 : 31] 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 Lamb of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the Lord where the ark of God was. Then the Lord called Samuel, and he said, Here I am, and ran to Eli and said, Here I am, for you called me. But he said, I did not call you. Lie down again. So he went and lay down, and the Lord called again, Samuel.

And Samuel arose and went to Eli and said, Here I am, for you called me. But he said, I did not call you, my son. Lie down again. Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. 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.

Therefore Eli said to Samuel, Go, lie down, and if he calls you, you shall say, Speak, Lord, for your seven ears. So Samuel went and lay down in his place. And the Lord came and stood, calling us at other times, Samuel, Samuel. And Samuel said, Speak, for your seven ears. And 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.

On that day, I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house from beginning to end. And I will 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. 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.

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. But Eli called Samuel and said, Samuel, my son. And he said, Here I am.

[3 : 59] And Eli said, What was it that he told you? Do not hide it from me. May God do so to you, and more also, if you hide anything from me of all that he told you. So Samuel told him everything and hid nothing from him. And he said, It is the Lord. Let him do what seems good to him. And Samuel grew, and the Lord was with him, and let none of his words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba knew that Samuel was established as a prophet of the Lord. And the Lord appeared again at Shiloh. For the Lord revealed himself to Samuel as Shiloh by the word of the Lord. And the word of Samuel came to all Israel.

Let's pray as we start. Father God, we thank you for your word, the Bible. We pray that you would use it and make it living and active in our lives this morning. Pray that you'd use me to speak clearly and faithfully. Amen. I wonder which part of what you learned at junior school you can remember most clearly. For some of us, it's quite a long time ago. For me, it's over a quarter of a century ago.

But I can remember, as though it was yesterday, the history lessons I had with a certain Mr. Simons, and the date chart that we learned from him in our history classes. He was famous for having once thrown a large metal bin at an uncooperative pupil. And whether that was fact or fiction, I didn't see it with my own eyes. It meant that he didn't have any particular problems with classroom discipline or with getting his date charts to be learned. And every week or so, he would add another key event in UK history to that date chart, be it the invasion of the Romans in 55 BC, 1066, or the Tudors and Stuarts, and so on. Why mention this? If my old history teacher were redrafting the history of Israel rather than the history of the United Kingdom, then I think one of the pivotal moments that would have been on his date chart would surely be this early part of the book of 1 Samuel, and indeed chapter 3, which we've just had read to us. The chapter recounts the call of Samuel, which led to a complete turnaround in Israel's fortunes. It also gives us an insight into the

Lord's approach for bringing revival. It would be very grateful if you could have the passage open in your Bibles as we look at it. It's on page 274 of the Church Bibles. Now, perhaps particularly for the suntanned among us who were on holiday last week, let's start by setting the scene. So for approximately 200 years, from around 1300 to 1100 BC, Israel had been ruled by judges, most of whom had turned away from the Lord. And it had been a kind of dark ages in their history.

I've just read a book on church history from 300 to before the Reformation, and you can see there were lots of dark ages there. And in some ways, the period of the judges had been quite similar to that, when no one was really hearing from God's Word. And it says in verse 1 of our passage, the word of the Lord was rare in those days. There was no frequent vision.

[7 : 31] The first two chapters of 1 Samuel introduce us to a young boy who God would use to usher in a new era and effectively to bring revival to the Jewish nation. Samuel had been born to Hannah after she had cried out to God, childless, and had promised that if she were given a son, then she would give him to the Lord. That's indeed what happened. And at the start of our chapter, we find Samuel is ministering to the Lord under Eli, the judge. The passage makes it clear that Samuel did not yet know the Lord.

Verse 7 we see, now Samuel did not know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not been revealed to him. That was about to change. The events of chapter 3 would change Samuel's life and spell the dawn of a new era in Israel's history, an era when God would speak directly to his people through Samuel in a way that he hadn't during the period of the judges.

We're going to look at this passage under three headings, which are also on the back of the service sheet. So Samuel hears his master's voice, then Samuel becomes his master's voice, and then thirdly, hearing the word of the Lord today.

So first, Samuel hears his master's voice. In verse 3, we read of Samuel lying down in the temple of the Lord where the ark of God was. The ark was a chariot which contained the tablets of stone on which the Ten Commandments were inscribed, which Moses had received.

And the ark doesn't feature prominently in this week's passage, but as we read on in 1 Samuel, it does become a focal point for the narrative in the next few weeks. Then we read this vivid story of the Lord speaking to Samuel, but his voice not being recognised, which has been a Sunday school favourite down the generations.

[9 : 19] Scholars think that Samuel was probably about 12 years old at this point, so in Grace Church terms, not quite old enough to join the youth group. I have no idea what the voice sounded like, but let's imagine it was something like this.

Samuel, Samuel. Samuel runs to Eli. Here I am for you, called me. He thinks his earthly master is calling. I did not call, says Eli, bleary-eyed probably.

Lie down again. A second time. Samuel, Samuel. Here I am for you, called me. I did not call.

Perhaps frustrated and bleary-eyed. Lie down again. Then the third time. Samuel, Samuel. And the third time, Samuel runs to Eli.

Here I am, for you called me. And Eli finally realises that something is up. He realises that the Lord is calling out to Samuel.

[10 : 30] He had perhaps been slow to recognise that it was the Lord speaking, though these early chapters of 1 Samuel do portray Eli the judge as God-fearing. They're not his sons. If he calls again, say, speak, Lord, for your servant hears.

So the fourth time he calls, Samuel responds to the master who is actually doing the calling, the Lord. Speak, Lord, for your servant hears.

It's worth pausing briefly on these words before we go on. These are great words for saints in any age to be saying to the Lord. Speak, Lord, for your servant hears. God had a particular role in his salvation plan for Samuel.

We'll be thinking more about that in our third point, and how we should expect to hear from God today, and ways in which we're different from Samuel. Nonetheless, all believers can and should be saying with Samuel, speak, Lord, for your servant hears.

Is it part of the pattern of our lives in August 2011 to be asking the Lord to speak to us? Samuel's example is a great one to follow.

[11 : 41] Let's now consider the one who speaks, Samuel's new master, the Lord. What do we learn about the great I am from the way in which he calls Samuel in this vivid story? Well, I think we see great tenderness.

Tenderness towards Samuel as an individual. This is not the gruff call of a sergeant major telling a rookie corporal what to do. It's not even comparable with a corporate boss giving a new task to a junior recruit.

It is the gentle, fatherly call of the Lord. He addresses Samuel tenderly, gives him time to understand what's happening. It's also the case that, as we see in the New Testament, as it's said in 1 Corinthians, God often calls the humble person in worldly terms.

He does not show partiality in the way the world does. I think this is quite striking. When the Lord calls a prophet who will make a major impact on Israel's history, and this is a turning point in Israel's history, bringing revival, he chooses to start with a 12-year-old boy.

1,100 years later, our saviour Jesus entered the world, also in apparent weakness as a baby born in a stable. God's ways are not our ways. Now that the Lord has called Samuel, and Samuel was listening attentively to his master's voice, the Lord gives Samuel his first revelation, the first of many in the book.

[13 : 06] It is not what Samuel wanted to hear. Let's pick up the story in verse 11. Then the Lord said to Samuel, Behold, I'm about to do a thing in Israel, of which the two ears of everyone who hears it will tingle.

On that day I will fulfil against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house from beginning to end. And I declare to him that I'm about to punish his house forever for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God and he did not restrain them.

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 patience with Eli the judge has run out.

Eli has failed to control his sons, who are blaspheming, who are abusing their position in the temple. They dishonoured God. They'd sought their own advantage. They thought of their own physical appetites, even as they ministered and held leadership positions in the temple.

It's interesting, linking with what Mark was saying earlier, after the events of this week on London streets, in the current debate about parental responsibility, which seems to be talked about every time we turn the TV on, to see here that the Lord does judge Eli because he had failed to control his sons.

[14 : 18] The Bible is very strong on parental responsibility, and perhaps that's a contribution that Christians can make to the debate. The Lord says that he will do something to make the two ears of everyone who hears it tingle.

Everyone will remember where they were when they heard about this. The sort of thing that we might say about the moment we heard of the death of Lady Diana. God has allowed the disobedience of Eli's sons to carry on for some time, just as he allowed the ear of the judges to carry on for a long time, around 200 years.

But his patience has now reached its limit. He passes sentence. He judges the household of the judge, Eli. His judgment is terrible and final.

It is forever. Now we might be asking ourselves, how can the Lord's judgment on Eli be so severe after the tenderness we've just seen in his calling of Samuel?

Psalms 86 speaks of the Lord as a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness. But a passage like this one shows us that his patience does eventually run out.

[15 : 35] He does judge those who disobey him. There might be part of us wishing that God never passed judgment, never revealed his wrath. Though if that were the case, he could not truly be God.

He would be a distant deity, leaving history to run its course without interfering to impose his will. That is not the God of the Bible, says 1 Samuel 3.

He is involved in human affairs. He does pass judgment, even if that judgment is deferred for a time. The Lord does care about what is happening. He does call time on certain situations.

He is powerful to intervene. So I take that as an encouragement, that it is worth praying about events in Libya, in Egypt, and indeed on our own streets this week.

Confident that the Lord can act to change the course of events in this world, and he will judge the evil deal. Having been given this weighty revelation about his earthly master's demise, Samuel surely knows that the Lord will want him to do something with it.

[16 : 42] This revelation isn't just Samuel for your information, like so many emails. That takes us to our second point. Samuel becomes his master's voice.

Through this revelation, Samuel is confronted straight away with the tension faced by prophets. Samuel is often considered as the first Old Testament prophet. Those who stand in the gap between God and his people.

Samuel naturally feels strong allegiance towards Eli, who had called Samuel my son, in verse 6. But he's been given this weighty revelation about Eli's demise, and he knows that if God has given the revelation, he will want Samuel to speak it.

Not surprisingly, Samuel wants to bury his head in his pillow and press the snooze button for a very, very long time. Picking up the story in verse 15.

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. But Eli called Samuel and said, Samuel, my son. And he said, here I am.

[17 : 48] Then Eli gives Samuel an ultimatum that makes the task easier for him. Eli. Eli said, what was it that he told you to do?

Do not hide it from me. May God do so to you and more if you hide anything from me of all that he told you. So Samuel speaks the word to Eli.

Eli, this old man whose eyes are weary, hears the terrible message, spelling the end for his household. And he accepts it. It is the Lord. Let him do what seems good to him.

Perhaps part of the reason that Eli accepts the message so quickly is that Samuel's words confirm the message that Eli had received from an unidentified man of God in chapter 2.

That man of God had also warned that Eli's family line would be brought to a sudden end. And as we'll see in the next two weeks, these two prophecies were not empty words.

[18 : 50] Eli's sons, Hophni and Phinehas, were subsequently killed in battle. And Eli himself died shortly afterwards. So Samuel, age 12, has done his first work as God's prophet.

He is the Lord's new voice in Israel. A new era has dawned in Israel's history. Israel now has a way of hearing from God. It will no longer be like the era of the judges when the word of the Lord was rare and every man did as he pleased.

The Lord will now speak, breaking a long silence. And as we read through the rest of 1 Samuel, as I've done this week, we see that he uses Samuel powerfully. When the people insist on having a king to rule for them, Samuel is the one who anoints Saul and then deposes Saul, when he's disobedient, to anoint David and then to usher in a golden era in Israel's history.

And in the final verses of our passage, from verse 19, the Lord continues to establish Samuel as his messenger. Samuel grew and the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground.

And all Israel, from Dan to Beersheba, knew that Samuel was established as a prophet of the Lord. Dan to Beersheba is like Land's End to John O'Groats. So it's like from the very south, Beersheba, to the very north, Dan.

[20 : 08] As we finish, I propose we spend a few moments thinking about how the Lord speaks to us today and to what extent we can apply Samuel's experience to ourselves. And that's our third point, hearing the word of the Lord today.

As we've noted already, none of us is Samuel, Israel's last judge and first prophet. We can be sure that none of us will have two books of the Bible named after us.

Unless you happen to be called Samuel, John or Timothy, maybe Corinthians. But that's cheating. It can be tempting to read ourselves directly into a story like this and expect God to speak to us in exactly the same way as he spoke to Samuel.

Though that is a dangerous and perhaps even an arrogant thing to do. In the book, Dig Deeper, who's read Dig Deeper? Some of us.

Which has been plugged throughout our summer series. it talks about various tools that are used to help us study the Bible. And one of them is the who am I tool.

[21 : 16] And that means considering my own identity and context and whether my role is similar or different to the character that the Bible is teaching me about.

And therefore, whether it's legitimate to try and apply the passage to me. So as an example of what not to do, the book tells a story of someone going to a home group where an account of Moses and the burning bush is read out.

And then the opening question from the leader, what burning bush experiences have you had? At which point everyone's hushed, probably feels slightly inadequate. And that type of question forgets that Moses had a unique place in salvation history.

And as a Christian believer, I cannot expect everything that happened to Moses to happen to me. So after studying this passage, I don't think we should feel inadequate if God has not spoken to us in the way that he spoke to Samuel.

It seems to be the experience of most Christians most of the time that God does not speak in such a way. Of course, God can speak in any way that he chooses.

[22 : 25] And I've met Christians and read biographies of Christians who have had a clear sense of God speaking to them directly, perhaps even audibly, calling them to a certain work, perhaps a missionary work.

And you probably have too. But it remains, I think, unusual and infrequent. So what can we do if we want to follow Samuel's example in being open to God's word?

We can start with the means of revelation that he has given us, which Mark opened the service with. We have the 66 books of the Bible. Samuel had less than 10 of them. We have revelation about the Lord Jesus through whom God speaks more powerfully than through any Old Testament prophet as the book of Hebrews reminds us.

We have revelation in our hands that Samuel did not have. So if we've lost our routines in studying the Bible during the summer months, can I encourage us to start again today and to ask God to speak to us?

One thing I found particularly helpful, as another plug, to help redeem the blackberry for those of us who spend too long attached to such devices, is to have a Bible loaded onto it with a reading plan with passages for each day.

[23 : 35] So can I encourage you to do something like that? And if you want me to set it up for you, I'm very happy to do that. We also have the Holy Spirit who's given to all Christians and helps us to understand the Bible and guides us in applying it.

So to follow Samuel's example of hearing the Lord, that the most reliable way is to be getting into our Bibles and praying that his Spirit would make its teaching discernible to us.

As we see in this chapter that the Lord was able to use Samuel and use him as powerfully to bring revival to the Jewish nation because he was someone who listened attentively to God and did not harden his heart even though he was given a very, very difficult message to pass on and this was only the first time that happened in the book.

So perhaps we can finish by praying that God would help us to follow Samuel's example as faithful listeners to his word and to heed the warning given in Psalm 95 which we read earlier in our meeting.

Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts. Let's pray. Lord God, we praise you that your ways are not our ways.

[24 : 48] Thank you for calling Samuel, a young boy, to be your prophet. Thank you for the way in which he used him. Help us, Lord, in our day to be those who are open and receptive to your word. Please speak to us this week and help us to line up our lives with your plans.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.