

When God Speaks...

THEOLOGICAL THEME: The Holy Spirit illuminates the meaning of God's Word so that we can understand, trust, and obey God.

Imagine if we had no Bible. Without God's Word, we would not know how the earth came to be or how evil entered our world. Without Scripture, we would not know what God is like or how we can live in relationship with Him. Without the Bible, we would not know right from wrong or why we exist in the first place. We know God because He has spoken to us.

Voices from the Church

"We trust the Bible because it is God's Bible. And God being God, we have every reason to take him at his word."¹

—Kevin DeYoung

Today, most of us have multiple copies of the Bible—men's Bibles, women's Bibles, and kids Bibles. We have Scripture on our coffee mugs and on our t-shirts. Technology has made it possible to carry multiple translations of the Bible on a phone in our pocket! The Word of God has never been more accessible, but are we hearing His voice?

 What kind of routine or activity helps you spend time in God's Word?

 What was the last thing God spoke to you through the Bible?

In this session, we come to the end of the period of the judges. In this tumultuous time, God spoke to a boy, Samuel, and gave him a message to receive, believe in, and proclaim. In this story of Samuel, we see the proper response to hearing God's voice: receiving, believing, and proclaiming. Through the Spirit, we too are able to hear God speak through His Word today and then proclaim His gospel to those around us.

1. Be prepared to receive God's Word (1 Sam. 3:1-10).

Here is a little backstory on Samuel's life. This child was chosen before he was born to be a prophet to the nation of Israel. His mother named him Samuel (possibly meaning "requested from God") because she prayed for a baby and then dedicated him to the Lord. As soon as he was weaned, Hannah took Samuel to live at the temple and to be raised by Eli, the priest in Israel.

¹ Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the LORD in the presence of Eli. And the word of the LORD was rare in those days; there was no frequent vision.

Notice that the word of the Lord was rare. This means that God was not speaking regularly to His people. The people would not listen to God's voice. So now, without hearing the word of God, the people were in distress.

Put yourself in a time and place when "the word of the LORD was rare." Shouldn't this make us grateful for the Word of God we have access to? The power of God's Word is one of the reasons that Scripture remains at the center of our church and our worship. We cannot trust merely in the creativity of leaders or the charisma of preachers or the wisdom of pragmatism—our churches must be built on and sustained by the Word of God.

99 Essential Christian Doctrines

6. Clarity of Scripture

Because God gave us His Word as authoritative in all matters related to life and faith, we believe His Word was written in a way that can be understood with the help of the Holy Spirit. Believing the Scriptures are clear does not mean that every part is equally easy to interpret; neither does it mean we will never make mistakes in our interpretation. It does mean that with God's help, people are capable of understanding the biblical text for themselves as they employ correct methods of interpretation.



What may be signs in our own times that “the word of the LORD is rare,” even if we have access to Scripture?



What does it look like when God is speaking and the church is listening?

² At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his own place. 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.

⁴ 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.

⁶ 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, my son; lie down again.”

⁷ Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him.

⁸ 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 boy. 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.

¹⁰ And the LORD came and stood, calling as at other times, “Samuel! Samuel!” And Samuel said, “Speak, for your servant hears.”

Notice how it took three times for Samuel to realize that God was speaking to him. Verse 7 says that he didn’t yet know the Lord personally. The word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. But even though Samuel didn’t know God, he was growing in his understanding. After this night, his life would never be the same.

Samuel’s eventual response to God’s voice is worth considering: “Speak, for your servant hears.” He was ready to hear the word of the Lord. To ask God to speak to us through His Word is to offer up our lives in faithful listening.



What difference did Samuel's preparation make in his ability to receive God's word?



How can we approach the Word of God with the expectation that He will speak to us?

In the miracle of this moment in redemptive history, let's not allow the experience of Samuel to overshadow the fact that God was speaking again! This was how He would rescue His people—by giving them Himself through His word. God was calling a prophet who would be a forerunner of Christ.

God doesn't give new revelation to prophets today as He did during this time. But God does prepare us to hear from Him. God still calls people through the reading and preaching of His Word.

The responsibility of the Christian is to have a receptive posture to hear from God. We develop an ear to hear God's voice and condition our hearts to receive His Word. We can spend time in prayer before opening Scripture and ask that God would adjust our eyes to His glory, that He would enlarge our hearts toward Him.

99 Essential Christian Doctrines

7. Illumination of Scripture

Because of the vast difference between God's wisdom and ours and because of humanity's sinful state, human beings are incapable, on our own, of fully grasping spiritual truth without being aided by the Holy Spirit through the process of illumination. When it comes to understanding the meaning of God's Word, Christians do not rely ultimately upon human reason in the process of interpretation, nor do we rely solely upon an institution or body of scholars. Instead, a Christian's ultimate reliance is upon the work of the Spirit of God, who illuminates the Scriptures in the heart and mind (John 14:15-18; 16:7-15).



What are some ways we can prepare our hearts to receive God's Word with gratitude?

2. Be prepared to hear whatever God has to say (1 Sam. 3:11-14).



¹¹ 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."

Eli's home was a wreck. His two sons, who were next in line to become priests, were blaspheming God, and Eli was completely passive in his leadership. Note how verse 13 says he did not restrain them. As a result of this, God's judgment was going to be poured out on his household.

There is a word of caution here for fathers. God calls fathers to lead their families in the ways of God. This is hard work that demands our attention.



When have you been open to receiving the Word of God only to find yourself convicted rather than comforted?



How did you respond to the challenge of God's Word?

Samuel was prepared to hear the word of God, even when it was very difficult. To sense how difficult this message was, let's try and put ourselves in Samuel's position. He had been unofficially "adopted" by Eli. Everything he knew about God came through the teaching of Eli. Now, Samuel, who loved Eli, was commissioned to pronounce judgment upon his house. Tough task for a young prophet!

We must be prepared to believe the Word of God in whatever it says. Whether the issues concern greed, the sanctity of human life, drunkenness, coveting, pride, or any kind of immorality, God never apologizes for speaking truth, and neither should we. But just as the heart of God is good and patient and kind, so should the tone of our message be expressed in love. Our task is to humbly love people with the truth, not stand in judgment over others.



Voices from Church History

"We need to repent of the haughty way in which we sometimes stand in judgment upon Scripture and must learn to sit humbly under its judgment instead. If we come to Scripture with our minds made up, expecting to hear from it only an echo of our own thoughts and never the thunderclap of God's, then indeed he will not speak to us and we shall only be confirmed in our own prejudices. We must allow the Word of God to confront us, to disturb our security, to undermine our complacency and to overthrow our patterns of thought and behavior."²

—John Stott (1921-2011)



How do you respond personally when the Bible "judges" the sin of your own heart?

3. Be prepared to deliver God's message to others (1 Sam. 3:15–4:1).

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. ¹⁶ But Eli called Samuel and said, "Samuel, my son." And he said, "Here I am." ¹⁷ 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." ¹⁸ 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."

¹⁹ And Samuel grew, and the LORD was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. ²⁰ And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba knew that Samuel was established as a prophet of the LORD. ²¹ And the LORD appeared again at Shiloh, for the LORD revealed himself to Samuel at Shiloh by the word of the LORD.

^{4:1} And the word of Samuel came to all Israel.

Eli called for Samuel the next morning to find out what the word of God was. Samuel told Eli everything. In this critical moment, Samuel walked in obedience to the word of the Lord. He chose to fear God rather than man. The ministry of Samuel for the rest of his days would be marked by this unwavering commitment to speak the truth to God's people. His message continued to ring out through Israel. He grew to be a great prophet who would anoint both Saul and David as the first two kings of Israel.

Like Samuel, we must also be prepared to share God's message. The message we have been entrusted with is the glorious gospel of Jesus. We are not called to share it in our own strength but by the empowering work of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8). We prepare to deliver God's message by praying for the people in our lives and in our area who do not believe the gospel. We can prepare our lives to deliver this message by going and sending missionaries to places that have no access to the gospel.



How are you preparing your heart to hear whatever God has to say?



What are some ways we can be faithful in delivering God's Word to others?

Conclusion

God is speaking. Into the darkness of our lives, He speaks. Through the waves of our doubts, He speaks. From generation to generation, His Word is clear and His Word is to be received with joy and gladness. We prepare ourselves by walking in humility before the Word of God. We position ourselves under its authority and believe whatever God has to say.

Through the faithfulness of Samuel speaking God's word, we see the shadow of the greater Prophet who would come—Jesus. Into the quiet, God would speak. Jesus would literally become “God's Word with us.” His Word would be among His people that we would know Him and He would be our God. Through Jesus, God would speak.

May it be true of us that we would be a people who are eager to receive the Word of God! May we be a people who believe whatever God says. May we be a people who are prepared to deliver God's message with empowered boldness.



Voices from Church History

“Speak, O Lord, Thy servant heareth, To Thy Word I now give heed; Life and spirit Thy Word beareth, All Thy Word is true indeed.”³

—Anna Sophia of Hesse (1638-1683)

CHRIST CONNECTION: As a prophet to Israel, Samuel listened to God and used God's words to tell the people what God is like. John 1:1 says that Jesus is the Word, sent by God to show the world what God is like.

HIS MISSION, YOUR MISSION

MISSIONAL APPLICATION: God calls us to be receptive to whatever He may have to say to us and then to deliver the truth of God's Word to others.

1. What steps will you take to increase your exposure and openness to the Bible, God's Word?

2. What are some areas in which Scripture confronts our society today? How can we speak the truth in love in these places?

3. What message from God's Word throughout this study on "The Promised Land" would you use to encourage and challenge our group/church?

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