

1 Samuel 3:1-21 // When Ears Start to Tingle

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[0 : 00] This morning's reading is from 1 Samuel chapter 3 and you can find that on page 273 of the church Bibles. So that's 1 Samuel chapter 3 and page 273.

The boy Samuel ministered before the Lord under Eli. In those days the word of the Lord was rare, there were not many visions. One night Eli, whose eyes were becoming so weak that he could barely see, was lying down in his usual place.

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. Then the Lord called Samuel. Samuel answered, Here I am.

And he ran to Eli and said, Here I am, you called me. But Eli said, I did not call, go back and lie down. Again the Lord called Samuel.

And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, Here I am, you called me. My son Eli said, I did not call, go back and lie down. Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord.

[1 : 14] The word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. A third time the Lord called Samuel. And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, Here I am, you called me.

Then Eli realized that the Lord was calling the boy. So Eli told Samuel, Go and lie down. And if he calls you, say, Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.

So Samuel went and lay down in his place. The Lord came and stood there, calling as at the other times, Samuel, Samuel. Then Samuel said, Speak, for your servant is listening.

And the Lord said to Samuel, See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make the ears of everyone who hears about it tingle. At that time, I will carry out against Eli everything I spoke against his family from beginning to end.

For I told him that I would judge his family forever because of the sin he knew about. His sons uttered blasphemies against God, and he failed to restrain them. Therefore, I swore to the house of Eli, The guilt of Eli's house will never be atoned for by sacrifice or offering.

[2 : 24] Samuel lay down until morning and then opened the doors of the house of the Lord. He was afraid to tell Eli the vision. But Eli called him and said, Samuel, my son. Samuel answered, Here I am.

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. So Samuel told him everything, hiding nothing from him.

Then Eli said, He is the Lord. Let him do what is good in his eyes. 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, recognized 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. Brilliant. Thanks so much, Amy, for reading. And it would be a great help to me if you keep your Bibles open at page 273, 1 Samuel chapter 3.

[3 : 33] And as Simon said, we have children here with us this morning. If you have a child with you, the workbooks are there to help the children along listening with us and understanding with the rest of us what God's saying to us this morning.

So let's join together in prayer again and ask for God's help as we come to his word. Heavenly Father, we praise you that you are a God who speaks.

A God who speaks to your people. A God who calls your people. We pray, Lord God, that through your word this morning you would speak to us.

We pray that you would teach us your word. We pray that you would reveal to us our needs for your words. That we may be transformed by your word.

Not just in mind, but by heart. So we pray that all in the name of the Lord Jesus. Amen. When you hear God speak.

[4 : 40] When you hear a sermon preached. When you come to God's word, a Bible. When you read God's word. When your mum or dad reads to you God's word.

What's going on? What happens to you? Do you see listening to a sermon as just one more thing to sit through and endure perhaps on a Sunday?

Or do you take it to heart as the very word of God? Do you approach the word of God with expectancy? As a divine message to be taken seriously?

When God speaks. Are you listening? And the theme of the passage in 1 Samuel 3. The theme can be put very simply.

It's expressed there in verse 11. In what God says to Samuel. In verse 11 he says. See I'm about to do something. That will make the ears of everyone that hears it tingle.

[5 : 43] When God starts to speak. When God starts to speak. Ears start to tingle. I'll put it another way. People wake from their spiritual slumber.

As God's word begins to be preached. With immediacy. So that's what we all need here. This morning. That's what Israel desperately needed back then. In the day of Samuel.

And that's what Scotland desperately needs today. The word of God to come in power by the spirit. So we'll see in our passage what's needed. First of all is the word of God.

And then we'll see secondly how God provides that in quite an unexpected way. So that's our two main headings if you want to follow along there in the handouts.

The need. Firstly for the word of the God. And secondly the provision of that same word of God. So first the need for the word of God. Sometimes you walk into a situation and it's total mess.

[6 : 46] Total carnage. You think where do I even begin to sort out this mess? Have you ever thought that? Perhaps you walk into a child's bedroom.

There's toys strewn across the floor. There's boxes emptied over. It looks like it's been ransacked. You can't see an inch of carpet. The theory of putting something away before you start something else has not been put into practice.

Where do you even begin? Sometimes we wonder that when we walk into our kids' bedrooms. Or perhaps you've had a bunch of folk around for dinner or something like that.

You've got experimental in the kitchen. Let me confess to you that that's something I occasionally get into trouble for at home. Getting experimental in the kitchen.

There's pots and pans piled high. Every conceivable kitchen utensil used. All the surfaces covered in flour and sinewy debris everywhere. There's matter coming out of the sink.

[7 : 45] Where do you even begin with a mess like that? Well Israel is a mess. Not in good shape at all. A disaster zone spiritually speaking.

And we're told in verse 1, In those days the word of the Lord was rare. There's an absence of the word of God. And that tells us something, doesn't it, about the spiritual condition of the place.

God's silence is like what the prophet Amos would later describe as a famine of the word of God. Well this sounds familiar, doesn't it?

All around us there is a famine of the word of God. Up and down this land. A famine of the word of God. All around us in our city here.

There's spiritually malnourished people desperately seeking spiritual sustenance but finding nothing. And not just in our society.

[8 : 45] But very sadly, very tragically in churches and pulpits up and down our land. The word of God is rare. There's no immediacy in the preaching.

If it's preached at all. If the gospel's even known at all. And of course there's exceptions. But the word of God is rare in our time.

It's the same in 1 Samuel 3. The word was rare. Now to see the bigger picture we need to flick back a few pages to the end of the book of Judges.

So if you turn back to page 266. And right at the end there of the book of Judges. Judges 21, 25.

The very last verse we're told. In those days Israel had no king. Everyone did as they saw fit.

[9 : 43] In those days Israel had no king. Everyone did as they saw fit. So that's the context that we find ourselves in at the beginning of 1 Samuel.

They still have no king. And you can see 1 Samuel and 2 Samuel is a search for a king. The book of Samuel is about King David. When you look at the big picture.

But at this stage they have no king. Everybody's doing as they see fit. It's absolute chaos. There's a leadership vacuum. And everyone's basically doing just whatever they think's right. Whatever's right in their own eyes. And again this sounds familiar. Doesn't it? And that phrase. Everyone doing as they see fit. Pretty much sums up the spirit of our own age. Sums up the spirit of our own time. So Israel's spiritually sick. But if we turn back to 1 Samuel 3. [10:40] Things are not looking good are they? So in verse 2. Eli's eyes were becoming so weak that he could barely see. This is the spiritual leader of the nation.

Eli's eyes were becoming so weak that he could barely see. His eyes dimmed. His senses dulled. Eli can't see physically. But he can't see spiritually either. He didn't recognize Hannah's piety in chapter 1. He thinks she's drunk. And he turns a blind eye to his own son's sinfulness in chapter 2.

That's what he heard about last time. The word was rare in those days. The leader is spiritually blind. But there's just a glimmer of hope in verse 3. We're told in verse 3. The lamp of God had not yet gone out. Now this is the lamp in the tabernacle. It was supposed to stay alight all night, every night and not go out.

[11:42] Here it is. And it's down to a flicker. And I think we're supposed to see here the symbolism here. The light of God's presence is diminished.

But it hadn't quite yet gone out. So this just gives us a slither of hope. And now if you track down to the end of the passage. So we start off at the beginning of the passage. The word is rare. If we go to the end of the passage, verse 21. The Lord continued to appear and revealed himself to Samuel through his words. And Samuel's words came to all Israel.

In other words, God's word through the ministry that Samuel's exercising comes to all the land. So do you see that trajectory? Do you see the arc of the narrative there? This is the first big contrast in this passage full of contrast. We go from a famine of God's word to a feast of God's word.

[12:42] The word of God throughout the land. Now that's a striking turnaround. A striking reversal in the state of the spiritual nation. And that surely gives us encouragement for our own day.

Because what we want to see is a reversal from a famine of the word in Scotland. To the word of God throughout the land. Transforming the place. Bringing about spiritual renewal to our people. Well it's night and day. Such is the contrast here. And it's literally night and day because it starts off in its night time, verse 2. One night Eli and Samuel go to bed.

But then by verse 15 it's a new day, isn't it? Samuel lay down until morning. And then open the doors. From night to day. From famine to feast.

And it's a new day because God is beginning to do something radically, transformatively different in the life of the nation. In the spiritual life of his people.

[13:44] Now up and down our land. Up and down our land. Church attendance is declining at a staggering rate. The established church is in free fall.

And a country that was once known as the land of the book is now just one of the most secular in Europe. The word of God is rare.

If we're to see a spiritual renewal in our land. We need to be clear about this. What's needed, first and foremost, is for the word of God to be faithfully preached throughout the land.

That's why we're so committed at St. Silas to preaching through the entirety of the scriptures. That's why we're so committed at St. Silas to our small groups, our growth groups, our roots groups, our one-to-one ministries, our training of pastors here.

Because we're committed to seeing the spiritual renewal in this land through the preaching of the word of God. Through the proclaiming of the gospel throughout our land.

[14:53] How God brings us about in 1 Samuel chapter 3 is quite interesting. It's quite surprising really how he brings us about. So this leads us on to our second main heading.

The provision of the word of God. When the word of God comes, who does it come to?

Verse 3. The lamp of God had not yet gone out. Samuel was lying down in the house of the Lord where the ark was. Not sure what he was doing there. But then the Lord called Samuel.

There's a famine of the word of God. An absence of God's word in our land. What are you going to do about it? Where do you even begin?

Now of course, ultimately, it's up to God. But let's just humor ourselves. Let's suppose for a minute that it was up to you. Let's say it's up to you.

[15 : 52] The word of the God is rare. What are you going to do about it? Where do you start? What changes are you going to make?

And I guess if we had time, we could probably list all sorts of things. Maybe the first thing would be to sort out the training institutes, the seminaries.

Make sure that those who are being taught to preach the word of God and bring the word of God to the people are being taught properly in the first place. Or maybe it's a major evangelistic program that we need to get behind.

Maybe that's the first step. Or maybe we need to up the game, as it were, in terms of our marketing for these events. Make sure that people are attracted to come to them in the first place.

And by the way, there's nothing inherently necessarily wrong with any of these suggestions. Maybe it's a reformation of the established church that's needed.

[16 : 49] Another reformation in this country. You could say it's a reformation in chapter 3 of 1 Samuel. But when the word of God comes, when God begins to speak, it's not through the established priesthood.

It's not through the high priesthood. It's certainly not through his sons that it comes in those days. When God speaks, he begins to speak through unexpected places, through unexpected people.

And when God begins to speak, God's word comes to just a young boy from basically a nobody family. Just 12 years old or thereabouts. Called to exercise at that young and tender age of prophetic ministry that would be transformative throughout the life of the nation.

And paving the way for King David. And that's interesting, isn't it? When we consider Jesus coming as the King of Kings.

That's what we need. The King of Kings. Before Jesus came, before the King comes, the word of God throughout the land prophetically. Coming through John the Baptist.

[18 : 04] Preaching a message of repentance. Repentance. We have here Samuel who prepared a way through his prophetic ministry. Exercise up and down the land of Israel from Dan to Beersheba.

Paving the way in the life of the nation for God's anointed and chosen King. But the surprise of this chapter is that when God's word comes, it's through an unexpected source.

Now isn't that just so very typical of the way that God works? So very often through unexpected people and in unexpected ways.

Sometimes when we're least expecting it. As we sit under God's word. As each of us come before God's word day by day and week by week.

And as God's word takes a grip on our lives. There's three things in our passage that I want us to be paying attention to about God's word when he begins to speak.

[19 : 11] Firstly, it's a gracious word. When God speaks, it's always so very gracious. It's what we need. We can't presume upon it. But when renewal comes through the ministry of God's word, the initiative is always, always the Lord's.

And what was rare in those days, the word of God, what was rare in those days actually happened that very night. The Lord calls Samuel.

He hears this voice calling in the middle of the night. And just think about what that would have been like for the young boy. Lying there on his bed in the dark in the middle of the night.

And he hears this voice calling his name. Samuel. Samuel. Can you imagine that? Lying there in your bed. Well Samuel is only young. He hears his name called.

It's by God's grace that the word comes. And it's a gracious word even in the way it comes. It's gracious in the way that it comes so very plainly to him. It's so plain a call that at first he doesn't get it.

[20 : 18] He thinks it's Eli. Such a clear call that he figures it must be the old man. So he runs to the old man's room. Here I am. And Samuel's initial response is just that of a servant, isn't it?

Here I am, he says repeatedly. And I think we're to recognize that his alertness and readiness to heed the call of this voice is in stark contrast to the weariness and lethargy of Eli.

Eli's very passive in this passage. Well Eli says, no, it's not me. Go back to bed. But it's a gracious word in how plainly it comes to the boy.

And it's a gracious word also in how persistently it comes. The Lord called again and again a second time, a third time. It's almost comical, isn't it? Samuel doesn't understand at first.

He doesn't get what's going on. You know, I'm grateful in my own life for how very persistent the Lord has been with me. I wanted to run away from his call on my life.

[21 : 24] I didn't want to hear it. I wanted to ignore it. I didn't want to know about it. But the Lord was persistent. And the Lord is wonderfully persistent and patient with those who belong to him.

He knows your circumstances. He knows your experiences. He knows your backgrounds. He knows your anxieties. He knows your quandaries. He knows if you're here this morning looking in the Christian faith, what your doubts are.

And if you're here looking in on the Christian faith, exploring it just at those early stages, nobody here is going to be asking you to make a snap decision about Jesus. The Lord is patient and persistent with those who belong to him.

The Lord's not in a rush with Samuel, is he? There's time for him to catch on and get who it is that's calling. So we've got this comment from the narrator in verse 7 to help us understand what's going on.

And it says, Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord. The word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. Now this, I think, is very striking because it's almost identical to what we read of Eli's sons in chapter 2, verse 12.

[22 : 41] They had no regard for the Lord. Now a closer, a more direct translation of that would be they did not know the Lord. So it's, in other words, it's almost exactly the same comment about Samuel as it is about Eli's sons.

With one important small difference, the word yet. The word yet. Samuel did not yet know the Lord. Tragically, Eli's sons would never know the Lord.

Such was their wickedness, such was their contempt for the word of God that they would never know him. Samuel did not yet know the Lord.

But that's about to change, isn't it? When Samuel's called a third time, something finally clicks for Eli, the sleepy priest, verse 8. And he finally realized that the Lord was calling the boy.

He perceives that it must be the word of God. So he gives the boy instructions for how to answer verse 9. And because you say, speak, Lord, for your servants listening. And so they go back off to bed.

[23 : 44] But then the Lord calls again. And it's a gracious word because it's so plain. It's a gracious word because it's so persistent. And we see most clearly in verse 10, it's a gracious word because it's so very personal. Notice just how personal this calling of the Lord is on the boy.

The Lord knows him by name, calls him by name. Samuel. Samuel. And it's personal not just through the use of his name.

But in the way the Lord came and stood there right before him. You can't get more personal than that, can you? The Lord came and stood there and called him Samuel, Samuel.

And so it's a gracious word when God begins to speak. It's also very often an uncomfortable word when God begins to speak.

Samuel doesn't get it easy, does he? He doesn't get an easy way into this new vocation. He needs to hit the ground running. The Lord said to him, verse 11, See, I'm about to do something in Israel that will make the ears of everyone he hears about it tingle.

[24 : 53] And faithfully preaching the word of God often makes for uncomfortable hearing of the word of God from time to time. We don't get to pick and choose which bits of the Bible we like.

It's not like going into a deli and handpicking the bits of food that you like. The Bible doesn't let you leave out the bits you don't like.

And the content of the message that God gives Samuel is far from comfortable. Verse 12, God says, I will carry out against Eli everything I spoke against his family.

So it's the same message basically that we heard last time, that he's already given to Eli through the man of God at the end of chapter 2. And it's a severe word, a message of judgment on the house of Eli.

Because the word of God isn't comfortable because it calls people away from their sinful ways. The word of God calls sinners to God, calls them to leave behind their sins and seek forgiveness and follow Jesus.

[25 : 59] But that's what we need. That's what's required. That's what faithful preaching demands. And it's what's required if people are to hear and to respond to the gospel.

As Paul writes in a letter to the Romans, how can they believe in him if they've never heard about him? And how can they hear about him unless someone tells them?

And how will anyone go and tell them without being sent? That's why the scriptures say, how beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news. The Lord had a special mission for Samuel. It wasn't going to be an easy mission. He was going to have to call to rebuke King Saul later on. And Samuel was called to be the Lord's mouthpiece in a unique way.

Right from the outset, he had to conquer his fears. He had to be brave for the gospel. He's to listen carefully to all that the Lord says. He's to do all that the Lord says.

[27 : 02] He's not to shy away from difficult messages to deliver. Well, that's the challenge of the prophetic ministry he's called to. And we too, we're not called to the same ministry precisely as Samuel.

But we're to be ready to give an answer to those who ask us what our hope is in the Lord Jesus. We're not to shy away when the opportunity presents itself.

Well, to his credit, when morning comes and Eli wants to hear everything, Samuel doesn't shy away, does he? In verse 18, he doesn't shy away from telling him everything, hiding nothing from him.

Now, I wonder what you make of Eli's response. Is this his final, finest moment finally?

Or is it something else? We're told verse 18, Eli said, He is the Lord. Let him do what is good in his eyes. So how about that?

[28 : 09] Sounds pious. Sounds like he's trusting in the Lord's sovereignty. Really, I think Eli's blown it here.

He isn't giving the answer that's required of a high priest. You may remember Moses, after he came down off the mountain and found out about the people's idolatry.

What does he say? He doesn't say it's the Lord's will. Let him do what's right in his eyes. He intercedes on behalf of the people.

That's what he's supposed to do. That's what the high priest is supposed to do. But Eli just gives up, doesn't he? He just wants to get back to bed and go back to sleep. Isn't that an appropriate response from Eli to the word of God?

We're meant to see here the contrast between the weary old priest and the alert young prophet in their respective responses to the word of God.

[29 : 13] Where's the repentance from Eli? Where's the acknowledgement of his own sins and the sins of his sons? Where's his confession of his giving up responsibility of pastoring his children for exercising pastoral discipline on them?

Where's the lamenting over the spiritual condition of the nation that's under his watch? He just gives up. Now, if you're a parent, at some point, every child, more or less, every child will go astray.

To a greater or lesser extent. And it's at this moment, sometimes the most loving thing a parent can do is also the hardest. God calls parents to speak the truth in love.

We're not to do an Eli and turn a blind eye. We're not to do an Eli and simply give up on them either. Don't give up on your prodigals if you have prodigal children.

For many years, I went far astray from the Lord. But my parents didn't give up on me. And I'm very glad of that. There wasn't that much that they could do practically for me.

[30 : 25] I'd already left home. But they didn't give up on praying for me, interceding to God on my behalf. And I'm very grateful to them for that. It's a gracious word when God begins to speak.

It can be an uncomfortable word when God begins to speak. And finally, it's a powerful word when God begins to speak. We see this in verse 19. The Lord was with Samuel as he grew up and he let none of his words fall to the ground.

This is a beautiful expression, isn't it? It's an amazing phrase. He let none of his words fall to the ground. We had a wedding here in this building a few weeks ago.

And instead of confetti at the wedding, we had bubbles. And there were bubbles. The church was full of bubbles. We had to aim them at precisely 45 degrees lest they splattered all over the bride's dress or something like that.

But children loved the bubbles. And children do love bubbles. They love to catch the bubbles before they fall to the ground. Rarely will there be the same success rate as Samuel's here.

[31 : 37] A hundred percent success rate. He let none of his words fall to the ground. In other words, whatever God says, Samuel does. And Samuel's response to God is always, speak, Lord,

for your servants listening.

He lets none of his words fall to the ground. Samuel was now a prophet. He would speak God's words.

And none of these words would fail. How would it be if that's how we approached the word of God? How would that be if that's how we approach sermons on a Sunday? How would that be if that's how we approached our quiet times day by day? No longer a tick box exercise.

Exercise. We let none of God's words fall to the ground. And one of the most important things we can do, one of the most important things you can do in your spiritual life is to say, I will let none of God's words fall to the ground.

[32 : 47] It changes things. It changes how we come to our small groups. It changes how we approach roots. No longer is it just a boring exercise to sit through and endure.

Now isn't it amazing that we have a God who has something to say to us, that speaks into our lives so very personally, so very graciously, so persistently.

Isn't that amazing? So we should make sure, all of us here, that not a single one of God's words falls on the ground, doesn't fall on empty ears, to take his words to heart.

Because God acts powerfully through his words. It's through his word, verse 21, that the Lord continues to appear to Samuel. It's through his word that the Lord himself reveals himself to Samuel.

It's through his word that God begins to act. And through Samuel, God's word comes to all Israel, bringing transformation throughout the land, preparing the people, preparing the way for the king.

[33 : 55] Isn't that what we want to see in our nation today? Isn't that what we want to see in Scotland and throughout the land? There's no need for a spectacular secret.

It starts with the ear-tingling hearing of the word of God, as God works in surprising ways, through surprising people, at surprising times, unlikely times, perhaps.

In closing, the American pastor and theologian, R.C. Sproul. Some of you might have come across him before. He died a few years back now. But not long before he died, R.C. Sproul was being interviewed.

And you can get that on YouTube. He's interviewed. You see him hooked up to Oxygen. And he was asked to reflect back on his life. And he was asked, what would he have done differently? What advice would he have given?

Could he have given his former self, his younger self? And he gives this sobering advice. Don't waste your time.

[35 : 03] Don't waste so much time. That's what I have said to my former self. He says, there's no substitute for immersing yourself in the word of God and proclaiming that same word of God to those around you.

Brothers and sisters, don't waste your time. Immerse yourself in the word of God and don't let any of his words fall to the ground. But ask that God would use you for his kingdom and glory and to bring renewal in this land.

So let's pray to that end. And let's speak to God. Let's pray. Lord Jesus, thank you that you are speaking to us through your word, through your living word.

Thank you that you are a faithful, faithful, loving God. We're glad that you know each of us here by name. And just as you knew Samuel and called him by name, we're glad that you call us to be your followers.

Help us, Lord, day by day to listen carefully to all that you have to say to us, to approach your word with expectancy, and be resolved to let none of your words fall to the ground.

[36 : 24] We pray that by the Holy Spirit, you would make us brave for the gospel and to tell all those around us about you that many would be saved for your kingdom. Would you renew, therefore, our land?

Would you build your church here in this land? For we pray it in your name. Amen. Amen.