

When God Speaks...

Summary and Goal

In this tumultuous time at the end of the period of the judges, 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.

Main Passage

1 Samuel 3:1–4:1

Session Outline

1. Be prepared to receive God's Word (1 Sam. 3:1-10).
2. Be prepared to hear whatever God has to say (1 Sam. 3:11-14).
3. Be prepared to deliver God's message to others (1 Sam. 3:15–4:1).

Theological Theme

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

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.

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.

Session Plan

When God Speaks...

Session 12

Introduction Option

As group members arrive, ask them to gather in groups of 3–4 to share about their first experience with the Bible. They can talk about the first Bible they owned, their first time trying to read it or study it, or even their first time learning about what the Bible is.

After a few minutes, transition to the Introduction by asking them to imagine a world without the Bible.

? For Further Discussion

So far in our chronological study of the Bible, we have seen God speak at pivotal times in history and in His people's lives. (Ex. creation; fall; Noah's flood; covenant with patriarchs; the exodus; wilderness period; conquering the promised land; and calling judges.)

In light of this pattern, what does this suggest about the importance of Samuel hearing God's voice?

How should we then view our time in which the Word of God is so prevalent?

Introduction

Briefly recap the Judges cycle and the stories of Deborah, Barak, Gideon, Samson, and Ruth (*use Pack Item 7: The Judges as needed*). Stress that God speaks in the events of each story, which shows His desire to be known (leader p. 142). Bring up our need for God's Word to know what God is like and how we can live in relationship with Him. Mention the accessibility of the Bible today (leader p. 142; PSG p. 110).

- ? 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?

Summarize this session on Samuel's story, noting that in him we see the proper response to hearing God's voice (leader p. 143; PSG p. 111).

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

State the context for Samuel's life and explain the origin of his name and residence at the temple. Ask a volunteer to read 1 Samuel 3:1. Comment on the rarity of God's word during this period (leader pp. 143-144; PSG p. 111).

- ? 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?

Read 1 Samuel 3:2-10. Point out that Samuel did not yet know the Lord personally. Mention how his eventual response to God's voice serves as an example for us (leader pp. 144-145; PSG p. 112).

- ? 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?

Establish that God was again speaking to His people in calling Samuel as a prophet. God doesn't give new revelation to prophets today as He did during that time, but nevertheless, Christians are responsible to be receptive to God's voice in Scripture (leader p. 145; PSG p. 113).

- 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).

Read 1 Samuel 3:11-14. Show how Eli's passivity in his home is a word of caution to fathers (leader p. 146; PSG p. 114).

- 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?

Explain why this situation would be difficult for Samuel given his relationship with Eli. This serves as an example of proclaiming the truth of God's Word regardless of what it says (leader p. 147; PSG p. 115).

- 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).

Note the two ways to approach the Word of God: stand in judgment over it or allow it to stand in authority over us (leader p. 148). Then read 1 Samuel 3:15-4:1. Describe how Samuel walked in obedience to the word of the Lord, and this set the tone of his ministry for the rest of his days. Communicate that we must also be prepared to share God's message (leader pp. 148-149; PSG p. 116).

- 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

Share that through Samuel's faithfulness in speaking God's word, we see a shadow of the greater Prophet to come—Jesus (*refer to "Samuel" on*

Pack Item 4: Seeing Jesus in the Promised Land). Because God has spoken in Him, we are to be prepared to speak God's message about what He has done with empowered boldness (leader p. 149; PSG p. 117). *Apply the truths of this session with "His Mission, Your Mission"* (PSG p. 118).

Point 2 Option

Before your group meeting, enlist a married couple (perhaps one that has older children) to share how they prioritize God's Word in the discipling of their children. Then allow a moment for others to share their thoughts and experiences.

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.

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.

Expanded Session Content

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Session 12

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



Introduction

As we have worked our way through this study of God's Word, God has spoken to us. Through the Judges cycle, He showed us His abundant mercy toward His people. With Deborah and Gideon, He reminded us that He is the God who fights on behalf of His people. With Samson, He showed us how He was the God who would claim victory over His enemies. In the Book of Ruth, He professed His loving kindness toward His people as their redeemer. In the events of each story, God has been speaking.

The Bible is God's voice. When we open the Word of God, we hear the words of God. First Timothy 3:16 says that every word recorded here is inspired—breathed out by God. The words on each page come from His breath! God wants to be known, He wants to be near, and He wants to be worshiped. So, He speaks.

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.

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?

Session Summary

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).

The Book of 1 Samuel begins in the time of the judges and ends with the story of Israel's first king. During this transition from the judges to the kings, God gave His people a prophet named Samuel. As a prophet, Samuel would speak to the people on behalf of God (1 Sam. 2).

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.

Eli was the priest in Israel, mediating between God and the people, and he had two sons, Hophni and Phinehas. These two men were nothing like their father in regard to knowing and worshiping God (2:12). People would come to worship God with sacrifices, but the sons of Eli would interrupt their worship and plunder all of the offerings people would bring. As Eli grew older, he lost control of his home. This is where our story picks up.

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.

In Proverbs, there is a text that says, "Where there is no vision, the people perish" (Prov. 29:18, KJV). This text literally means that without the word of God, or revelation from God, the people perish. This is exactly what we have seen—people perishing—as everyone has been doing what was right in their own eyes, contrary to the word of God.

Further Commentary

"Samuel was still the young apprentice, learning from Eli and subject to him. Nothing indicated that the Lord was about to inaugurate a new era; indeed 'the word of the Lord was rare'...[T]imes of greater blessing had evidently been known, when people had more readily received guidance from the Lord. As it was, Samuel had not had opportunity to experience the receiving either of an oracle or of a vision. 'At that time...the Lord called' is the sense; the description in between sets the scene more fully. Eli's failing eyesight meant that Samuel did his duty by sleeping in 'the temple'; 'the lamp' which was kept burning from evening to morning (Ex. 27:21) 'had not yet gone out,' so the time was most likely early morning. It says much for Samuel's self-discipline that he got up three times in the early hours in response to what he thought was Eli's call. His willing obedience was a qualification for receiving God's word. 'Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord': he had not had personal experience by which to recognize the Lord's call (cf. v. 1). 'The Lord came and stood forth,' so becoming visible as well as speaking. Samuel now received both word and vision."²

—Joyce G. Baldwin

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.

Voices from the Church

"The Spirit who inspired Scripture is the Spirit who illuminates Scripture. He speaks through God's Word in order to make us wise."³

—J. D. Greear and Trevin Wax

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.

-  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?

The word of the Lord was rare, but not for long. As our story continues, we see that, here, God did not choose to speak to the cultural elite, a leader, or even a general, but instead to a boy.

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.

Even Eli didn't seem to be expecting God to speak. It took both of them three times to realize that it was God calling in the night. Samuel was God's chosen instrument. Metaphorically, Eli's sight was growing dim, while Samuel's eyes were opening to the word of God.

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.

Our sight is like Eli's, dim and fuzzy, and when we go to Scripture, we need the Lord to prepare us and adjust our eyes. Sometimes we feel like God is a million miles away, and we can't hear His voice. Even when we read the Bible, we may feel like we're reading a dusty old history book, not the living, breathing Word of God. If that is you, I encourage you not to give up. Recognize that God has spoken to you. God's loudest word is the gospel. In it He has spoken His love and acceptance over you in Jesus. Keep preparing your heart to hear from God.

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

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).

Voices from Church History

"My advice to you is take your difficulty before God in prayer, and say, 'Speak, Lord; for your servant hears.' Do not ask God to confirm your opinion, but ask Him to make your opinion conformable with His Truth...Follow the simple Word of God as you find it and rest assured you shall have the Light of the Holy Spirit streaming upon the sacred page. And as you read it you shall hear the Master say, 'This is My Word.'"⁴

—Charles Spurgeon (1834-1892)

Further Commentary

“The Lord’s terrifying revelation was in fact a confirmatory repetition of the judgment against the house of Eli given by the unnamed prophet (2:30–36). Though prophetic messages could be conditional—warnings of possible consequences resulting from continued disobedience (e.g., Jonah 3:4)—in the case of the words spoken against the house of Eli they were certain. Every promised outcome—‘from beginning to end’ (v. 12)—would become reality. And Eli, as the family patriarch, would bear the brunt of the blame because ‘he knew about’ (v. 13) his sons’ ‘contemptible’ sins but ‘failed to restrain them’ (cf. Deut. 21:18–21). Eli’s conscious failure to enforce divine law in his own family amounted to a high-handed (i.e., deliberate) sin; as such it could ‘never be atoned for by sacrifice or offering’ (v. 14; cf. Num. 15:30–31). Furthermore, the magnitude and form of God’s judgment would be so shocking that it would cause ‘the ears of everyone who hears it to tingle’—that is, to give rise to great fear and dismay (cf. 2 Kings 21:12; Jer. 19:3).”⁵

—Robert D. Bergen

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

In Judges, we’ve seen how God pours out judgments on His enemies, but here in 1 Samuel, we see the judgment of God poured out on His own priest. The good news that God speaks quickly becomes bad news for Eli.



“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.

As parents, my wife and I often wonder how to respond when our kids sin. We wonder how best to love them, discipline them, and point them to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Though the task is hard and we don’t have all the answers, we know that we must be active in leading our families. We cannot let our children go unrestrained, but we teach them, discipline them, and pray for them that their hearts would be turned toward God. While we are not ultimately responsible for the actions of our children, we are responsible for the household they are raised in.

- ❓ 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!

The word of God here was not comforting but confrontational. Often when we read the Bible, we come across difficult truths. It's not easy to accept the reality that we are sinners in need of a Savior. It's offensive to read that Jesus is the only way to God or that our sin means we deserve God's just judgment. Our culture is one in which "everyone is doing what is right in their own eyes," which makes it difficult to hear and receive and proclaim a message that runs counter to what society wants to hear.

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.

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

Further Commentary

"Eli's house has despised God's sacrifices and offerings (2:29), and hence these things will have no efficacy on their behalf. Though normal or inadvertent sins of priests could be 'atoned for' by 'offering' (Lev. 4:3-12), Eli's sons sinned defiantly, and their guilt could not be removed (Num. 15:30; see also Heb. 10:26), as Eli himself recognizes (1 Sam. 2:25)."⁶

—David Toshio Tsumura, *ESV Study Bible*

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."⁷

—John Stott (1921-2011)

Further Commentary

“Samuel was afraid to tell Eli the vision, probably because Eli had served as Samuel’s guardian and mentor and Samuel did not want to bring him bad news. Eli’s words sound harsh, but they were probably intended to encourage Samuel to share the full details of his revelation. This was the standard form of an oath (cp. 2 Sam. 3:35). The Lord’s word to Samuel confirmed the earlier word that Eli had received from the man of God (2:27-36). The cities of Dan and Beer-sheba essentially marked the northern and southern borders of Israel, respectively, spanning a distance of about 110 miles (2 Sam. 3:10; 24:2). Samuel had demonstrated a willingness to receive and follow God’s word, so ‘the LORD continued to appear in Shiloh,’ whereas He had not done so during the unfaithfulness of Eli’s day (v. 1).”⁸

—Bryan E. Beyer,
HCSB Study Bible

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

There are two ways to approach the Word of God: to stand in judgment over it or to allow it to stand in authority over us. When we open the Bible, the posture of our hearts cannot be “I’ll let others decide if Your word is true or not.” No, our hearts must cry out, “It’s true!” Part of listening to God’s message and believing it is true is delivering it to others. This is what Samuel did with boldness after hearing God speak.

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.

I can imagine Samuel lying in his bed unable to go back to sleep after spending time with God. With human ears, Samuel heard the whisper of the Lord. Eli probably didn’t sleep much either. Perhaps he expected to hear that God’s judgment was coming upon him and his household.

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.

Samuel was the first of a new kind of prophet, not one who would suddenly come in and out of the people’s lives, but one who would live among the people and speak the word of God constantly. The Lord was with Samuel, and none of his words were meaningless. His words were effective because he walked by faith and in obedience before his Maker. Samuel walked with God and talked for God.

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 says, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” 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.

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.



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.”⁹

—Anna Sophia of Hesse (1638-1683)