

When a Rare Word becomes an Abundant Word (1 Samuel 3:1-4:1a)

Introduction:-

The story before us today is familiar to many from childhood. The drama of a young lad listening to and responding to God's Word and voice has been told as an appealing example to follow down through the ages. We will never forget our own daughter Cathy's second birthday in Zambia, on 29th August, 1983, when we presented her with a Children's Living Bible. On the front page, where details for the presentation of the Bible are given, including the date, there follows at the bottom of the same page, a picture of the boy Samuel, listening for the voice of God to be heard, from his bed, within the Temple. And on the opposite page we wrote the words, "You are much loved by Mummy and Daddy, and even greater loved by Jesus. Our prayer is that God will make you his beautiful child forever. Jesus will always keep you in his arms". Dated 26th August, 1983. And some of the earliest words written by Cathy herself within this Bible, are the words, "Happy are those who hear the Word of God." Thus the story of Samuel obviously left a deep impression upon Cathy's heart, even from her earliest childhood, that has helped to mould the person she is today. But let us now build even further upon these wonderful and abiding childhood memories and experiences of Samuel, which, let me say, will never lose their power, efficacy, or lasting appeal, as we now turn to consider the greater significance in which the story of Samuel is told within this chapter today.

1. First we encounter the Word of God as Rare in Israel (verses 1-7)

This passage begins with Samuel ministering before the Lord under Eli, which suggests that Samuel is silently and steadily rising, whilst the aged Eli is steadily falling, becoming so weak, that he could barely see, in fulfilment of the prophet's word back at 1 Samuel 2:27-36. Further, in those days the Word of God was rare, for there were not many visions, which may suggest the infrequency of the prophetic Word in Israel, in spite of 1 Samuel 2:27-36 just before this passage. This is supported at Amos 8:11-12, when people in Amos's day would also experience a famine of hearing the Word of God through the prophet. This would be the one great famine to fear, because the Word of God was Israel's only life-line within the land, and it is the same for us as well today (Deuteronomy 8:2-3). One further suggestion is that this scarcity of hearing the Word of God might also be linked to the Sanctuary under Eli, and the disobedience connected with his priesthood. In fact, when we go down to the end of this chapter at verse 21, we discover that the Lord continued to appear to Samuel at Shiloh through his Word, as a frame to verse 1, thus linking his role as a faithful prophet, back to that of the faithful priest that God would also raise up at 1 Samuel 2:35. Initially, this faithful priest could have also been Samuel himself, who would pave the way for Zadok later on, in the time of David and Solomon. And so it is also possible, that where Yahweh's Word had been scarce at Shiloh, in terms of the disobedient priesthood and the Sanctuary, it was now abundantly available through the obedient Samuel, who ministered at Shiloh, both as prophet and priest before the Lord. Finally, this opening passage suggests that Eli's failing sight points ironically to his lack of spiritual vision, whereas Samuel himself will receive God's Word for the future. The mention of the lamp that had not yet gone out (Exodus 27:20-21), indicates that Samuel heard God's voice during the night hours, while the lamp was still burning, recalling the Burning Bush of Exodus 3, when God spoke out of the fire to Moses. But the fact that God speaks while the lamp is still burning in the

darkness, may symbolize a Word of hope for the future. We are not told why Samuel slept in the House of God near the Ark of God. Did the voice of God come from the Ark? Certainly the Ark symbolized the presence of God, as later reflected at 1 Samuel 4:4. But this text also mentions Hophni and Phinehas, who were with the Ark on this occasion, when it was disrespectfully fetched from the Temple at Shiloh. But this action would soon lead to their deaths. The difference therefore being that Samuel served the Lord obediently as a priest, and could dwell in God's presence beside the Ark with safety and blessing, whereas Hophni and Phinehas treated the Lord with contempt, by blaspheming God. For them, the fetching of the ark from the Temple would eventually lead to their deaths at the hand of the Philistines. Then coming back to the situation before us, the Lord began to call Samuel, initially two times, but on each occasion, Eli sent him back to lie down. Finally, in verse 7, the comment is made that Samuel did not "yet" know the Lord. Up to this point, the Lord had not fully revealed himself to Samuel, in terms of personal encounter. In contrast, the text of 1 Samuel 2:12 also says that Eli's sons "did not know the Lord", but with one important difference. Relating to Samuel, the word "yet" is anticipatory, and means that the obedient Samuel will come to know God in time, and the Word of God will be revealed through him. Here we might ask the question - What distinguishes us from those who "do not know the Lord" today? Can we identify ourselves with Samuel, as those with whom God is pleased to speak His Word, and reveal His Will?

2. Secondly we encounter the Word of God as Revealed to Samuel (verses 8-14)

When the Lord called Samuel on the third occasion, Eli realized that it was the Lord who was calling the boy. At this point, there is a touch of tragedy, sadness, and irony, because the Lord was no longer speaking to the chief priest, Eli (cf. King Saul at 1 Samuel 28), but was rather speaking to his young apprentice, Samuel. And so, Eli gave Samuel further priestly instruction as to how one may respond to a divine revelation within the Temple - When the Lord calls you, say, "Speak Lord, for your servant is listening." Had this been Eli's privilege in the past, which was now lost? At this moment, had he have only wished that the Lord could have continued to speak with him? And when this call did come to Samuel for the fourth time at verse 10, we read that "the Lord came and stood there", calling as at other times, "Samuel, Samuel", reflecting Moses' call at the Burning Bush (Exodus 3:4; cf. Luke 1:8-25 with Zechariah in the Temple). To which Samuel replied, "Speak, for your servant is listening." With this reply, Samuel omits the word "Lord", perhaps because he may have thought that Eli may have got things wrong, or perhaps because of fear or reverence for the Lord's name. When Eli later asks for a report of the message, he too is wary, asking, what was it that he (as opposed to the Lord) said to you, thus needing to hear the report, before concluding that this was from the Lord. Finally, the message delivered to the boy Samuel was one of unremitting judgment upon the house Eli, in confirmation of the earlier prophecy given through the man of God at 1 Samuel 2:27-36. Further, because of the specific sin of blaspheming God, seen through the desecration of the sacrifices, the guilt of Eli's house could never be atoned for by sacrifice or offering. Truly a case of the punishment fitting the crime!! But what words to hear as your very first words from the mouth of God, especially as a young person in the service of God, and directed to the one who is your current spiritual friend and mentor!! And so, the modern tendency to protect children from hard truths, is not reflected here. But what a blessing it was, for the young Samuel to hear the Lord speaking in the darkness, in order that Israel might finally find a way forward, and live in the light of the Lord's Word and future for them.

3. Thirdly, we encounter the Word of God as Abundantly Revealed to Israel (verses 15-4:1a)

This last section begins with a ray of hope, when we read in verse 15 that Samuel lay down until morning, and then "opened the doors" of the house of the Lord, perhaps because he would feel naturally fearful and reluctant to immediately deliver such a difficult word in the night hours to Eli. One scholar has even suggested that the reference to Samuel "opening the doors" of the Temple may find its clue back in 1 Samuel 1:5-7 where the Lord had closed the womb of Hannah, and whenever Hannah went up to the House of the Lord, her rival would provoke her till she wept and would not eat. But now, Samuel, as the fruit of Hannah's opened womb, was able to "open the doors" of the Temple, in order that Israel might now experience a new era of joy in hearing the Word of God. This viewpoint has some support from verses 19-21, and 4:1a, where the Lord not only continued to reveal himself to Samuel at Shiloh, but also in the place where the Word of God had once been scarce, it was now abundantly available, as Samuel ministered at Shiloh, and as a result, Samuel's word came to all Israel. Finally, when Samuel told Eli all that the Lord had revealed to him, Eli then recognized that this word was from the Lord. And as Samuel grew into adulthood, we read that all of the Lord's words were fulfilled through him, and all Israel, from Dan to Beersheba, recognized that Samuel was attested as a prophet of the Lord (v. 20). And so in this chapter, we have moved full circle from the Word of God which was rare at verse 1, to the Word of God made abundant at verse 21. And the difference is found in the raising up of a young Samuel, who heard the voice of God speaking to him, when all else appeared to be lost, which then led to the whole nation finally being blessed through hearing the Word of God through Samuel.

Conclusion

This passage underlines the importance of the God who speaks to us, when all else appears to be lost, and our ability to hear His voice, and respond obediently to what He says. God has much to say to us. But as with the young Samuel, it is possible to hear God's voice, but not know it. For Samuel, this voice was auditory, but for us, this may well prove to be the exception rather than the rule, in most cases. On the other hand, with Eli, it is possible for the true believer to cease from hearing the voice of God, as with Israel's first king, Saul, at 1 Samuel 28. But with Samuel, sometimes we need further help and direction in discerning the voice of God, when this is not clear. Let us never forget that God can speak to us in many different ways, chief of which is through God's Spirit, and the Word of God itself (John 16:13 = When the Spirit of truth comes, He will guide you into all truth). And ultimately, it is the Word of God itself, which will provide the true test against which we measure the authenticity of these other voices. But finally, as with this passage, think of what is lost, when do not heed the voice of God, and on the other hand, what is gained, when we listen to, and obey his voice. Elijah proved this after listening to the still small voice of God at Mount Horeb at 1 Kings 19:15-18. And who knows where our similar response may lead us? Lord, help us to be like Samuel, by becoming good and obedient listeners to your voice and Word. Amen.