

You need a prophet to prosper

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[0 : 00] We turn now to our Bible reading for this evening, and that is in 1 Samuel chapter 3. You'll find that on page 227, if you have one of the visitor Bibles there, 227.

And 1 Samuel chapter 3, reading from verse 1 to the very start of chapter 4. 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. 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 lamp of the Lord 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. Lie down again. So he went and lay down.

[1 : 22] 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 boy. 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. And the Lord came and stood, calling as at other times, Samuel, Samuel.

And Samuel said, Speak, for your servant hears. 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.

[2 : 34] On that day, I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house from beginning to end. 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.

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. Eli called Samuel and said, Samuel, my son.

And he said, Here I am. 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.

[3 : 49] 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 Bathsheba 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 at Shiloh by the words of the Lord. And the word of Samuel came to all Israel.

Amen. This is the word of the Lord. And may he bless it to us this evening. Well, please do have 1 Samuel chapter 3 open in front of you.

You don't know how good you have it until it's gone. Hopefully that's a familiar saying for most of us here this evening. And hopefully most of us will recognize that it's true.

You don't appreciate what you have until it is taken away from you. For example, you take your health for granted until that day you fall ill.

[5 : 01] You grumble about your job until the day you face redundancy. You criticize loved ones until the day tragedy strikes and it's too late to tell them how you really feel.

We don't know how good we have it until God strips things away from us. Over the last couple of weeks, we've seen that God's people who received this book of 1 Samuel needed a turnaround in

their fortunes.

The glory days of David and Solomon were far behind them and people longed for things to be better again. And so far in this series, we've seen different elements of what were needed to reverse Israel's fortunes.

Hannah Song emphasized the need to live under a good king who would defeat all their enemies. And the downfall of Eli's household emphasized the need for God honoring religious leaders if God's people would flourish again.

While this week, the focus is all on the need for something we are very prone to take advantage of and to overlook completely. God's word.

[6 : 15] The ultimate thing we take for granted until it is taken away from us. We can see the need for good leadership pretty clearly, I think, quite often, especially in the age we live in today where it doesn't look like there's really any good options in government.

We see how a good king or a good religious leader could greatly impact the welfare of the people who sit underneath them. But God's word, is that really so important?

Is it really so crucial to our flourishing? Well, the truth is that if God's people are to flourish in any age, then they desperately need God to rule them by his word.

That's how he works. If God doesn't speak, if he remains silent, then God's people are doomed to nosedive and spiral out of control. God's people can't expect a turnaround in fortunes if they live divorced from God's word.

Well, let's look at the passage together, shall we? And help us just to see how integral God's word is to the prospering of his people. We're going to take this passage under three headings.

[7 : 26] We'll look at the problem, the provision, and the prospect. What's gone wrong? What does God do about it? And how are things going to be different as a result of what God does?

So our first point for this evening, the problem. An unfamiliar word. Looking at verses one to nine.

The writer of 1 Samuel starts off this chapter by stating the problem that Israel were facing.

Verse one. 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.

There was a famine. Not a famine of food, but of God's word. God's voice and direction were no longer heard in Israel.

If that didn't change, then the fortunes of Israel couldn't change either. Now some of you might be struggling to see how that is such a big problem.

[8 : 31] In fact, some of us here tonight might secretly wish we were a little less catered for in terms of God's word here at the Tron. We purposely center everything around God's word, don't we, when we meet together on a Sunday or in small groups or during the week.

But some of us might think, you know, you can get a little too much of a good thing, can't you?

Perhaps the sermons could be that little bit shorter. Perhaps the preacher could spend a bit more time, I don't know, warming us up a bit, maybe cracking a few jokes to get us on side.

Perhaps even we could just cut down the sermon a little bit and spend a little bit more time singing because that's where I really feel most engaged in the service. But do you see what mindset is behind all those suggestions?

You think that something is better, more important for your growth as a Christian than understanding what God has to say to you. Whether that be entertainment, fellowship, or that emotional spiritual hit that you sometimes get when you're singing.

Now imagine just for a moment what it would be like to never hear God's word. all you have to base your life on is how you perceive the world around you.

[9 : 49] Some of us who became Christians later on in life might be able to remember that pretty clearly. Let me tell you, it's an utterly confusing and tormenting place to be in.

You have to decide how you're going to live based on the actions of what everyone else around you is doing. And that standard, well, it seems to shift all the time. for just like in Samuel's time, everyone just does what is right in their own eyes.

You might have a concept that there perhaps even is a God out there, but you certainly have no idea what he is like, whether he's knowable, what he expects from you, or how you even begin to get any of that information.

You're left rudderless in life, making up for yourself how to live, and after a while that gets utterly exhausting. What if I've got it all wrong, you think to yourself?

You don't know if you're on the path to salvation or the path to judgment. Anyone's guess is as good as another's. Strip God's revelation in his word from your life, and the consequences are absolutely devastating.

[11:01] When there's a famine of God's word, then God's people are forced to live life blind, just like the pagans around them. Unknowingly treading the path to destruction.

And that was what was happening in Israel. The blind were leading the blind. Notice the peculiar and seemingly unnecessary details we get in the narrative. Verse 2, At that time, Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his place.

Why do you think we need to know about Eli's ophthalmic health? Does the author want us to speculate what kind of eye condition he has?

Do you think he has cataracts, or macular degeneration, or, I mean, glaucoma maybe? No, that's not what the author wants us to think about. That isn't what he cares about at all.

Rather, he wants us to relate Eli's eyesight problem with a spiritual problem in Israel that's mentioned in verse 1, that there was no frequent vision in Israel.

[12:14] Eli's spiritual sight was as cloudy and as deficient as his spiritual sight. The author wants us to see that we're not to expect any vision through Eli.

God had forsaken his house in the last chapter. No revelation, no words from God would come through him or his family. And if the religious leaders didn't know God's word, well, then what hope did the nation have?

But notice another seemingly unnecessary detail the author mentions in verse 3. The lamp of God had not yet gone out.

Again, the author plays on this vision-light idea. though the ones you'd expect to lead Israel by God's word were in the dark, there was still a flicker of light.

There was hope. Samuel was lying down in the temple of the Lord where the ark was. In the depth of the night, there was one place where the light was still shining and it was basking Samuel in its glow.

[13:25] Samuel, who had not been forsaken like Eli and his household, lay before the ark of God. God could still bring light out of darkness and speak to break the silence.

And the scene is set for Samuel to be the centre of that drama. And so the drama begins, or perhaps better the pantomime, for it certainly reads that way, doesn't it, in verses 4 to 9.

It's so repetitive like a pantomime, and the protagonists in the story seem to be absolutely clueless as what's going on, whilst us the readers seem to sit back and laugh at them somewhat, but they're not quite getting it.

Verse 4, 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 then the same thing happens a second time in verse 6, but with an author's comment in verse 7, explaining to us readers who know what's going on, why Samuel is acting absolutely clueless.

[14:37] Verse 7, now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. Now just to be clear, when the author tells us that Samuel didn't know the Lord, it doesn't mean that he didn't know the Lord in the same way that Hophni and Phinehas didn't in the last chapter.

Remember, those were the exact words God used to assess Hophni and Phinehas, the really wicked priests. They had every opportunity to know the Lord, and yet they rejected him, they abused him, dishonored him, and abused his people.

Samuel, on the other hand, does know God in a sense. He served him, he loves him, but he doesn't know him in the sense that he's never heard his voice.

God had never spoken to him directly, he had never received God's words personally, so it couldn't be expected to recognize God's voice when he called out to him in the temple.

There are multiple levels of knowing someone, aren't there? And we all recognize that meeting someone face to face, hearing them speak in person is one of the most intimate ways of knowing somebody.

[15:55] Samuel didn't know the Lord on that level, but he knew him enough that he'd already covenanted to serve him all the days of his life. Anyway, that's why Samuel keeps going to Eli, because he doesn't know God's voice, so assumes it must be Eli, the priest.

But notice, Eli doesn't realize what's happening either, does he? It's only on the third occasion in verse 8 that Eli finally twigs. It's, well, it would be comical if it wasn't so tragic.

He was so unfamiliar with God's word that it took such a long time from to what was actually happening, for God's word had all but been forgotten by Eli and all in Israel.

For God had purposefully remained silent as a judgment on God's people, in response to their disobedience. The silence of God is always a great judgment, isn't it?

Let me read to you another account of God judging Israel in Amos chapter 8. Let me just give you a bit of context first. God has just told Israel that a terrible day is coming when Israel will languish and be cursed by God.

[17:09] And this is what God says. Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord God, when I will send a famine on the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord.

They shall wander from sea to sea and from north to east, and they shall run to and fro to seek the word of the Lord, but they shall not find it.

Only once it's gone do you realize how important God's word is to your flourishing. Without it, you're left desperate, rudderless, running to and through, with no hope of your prospects changing.

And we must take that message to heart, mustn't we, as carefully as Samuel's first reader did.

When we are feeling thankful for God's word in our lives, we must remember how drastic our lives would be without it.

When we find ourselves tuning out of sermons, we all do it, don't worry, our minds wandering to what's happening tomorrow, what's happening at work, then we must remind ourselves that this is the most crucial thing we can be doing at this moment in time, sitting under God's word, listening to his voice to us.

[18:35] You see, the problem is in our day that there isn't a famine for God's word, like there was in Samuel's day. We have God's word available at the touch of a button, don't we, and as many translations as we want, and we have Bible study notes too, a touch of a button, to help us read it for ourselves and understand it.

The problem in our age is not a famine, but rather a lack of appetite for God's word. But we really do not believe that God's speaking in our lives is crucial to our flourishing.

How could the trajectory of my life really hang on my attitude towards an ancient book? It may seem ludicrous, but God is telling us this evening that it really does.

And it's been the same for all God's people throughout all of history, including the people in Samuel's day, and those who first received the book of Samuel. They desperately needed God to speak if there was to be any hope for them.

And mercifully, that's exactly what happened. Our second point for today, the provision. An unwavering prophet, looking at verses 10 to 18.

[19:53] God provides what his people needed. Out of the darkness, a light finally shines. Out of silence, God speaks.

Eli advises Samuel to answer, speak, Lord, for your servant hears when he next hears the voice.

And Samuel does exactly that when God not only calls again to him, but notice presences himself before Samuel in verse 10 and reveals to him what his purposes are.

What follows in verses 11 to 14 are really just a rerun of what the man of God in the last chapter has already said to Eli and his household. God discloses to Samuel the exact same things the man of God has already said, but possibly in less detail than in the previous chapter.

Verse 12, he will fulfill all that he had spoken against Eli's house. Remember, he was going to strip the priesthood from them. He wasn't going to allow these men to dishonor him and abuse his people any longer.

They were going to find themselves begging for food rather than sticking their fork into other people's portions and feeding themselves and indulging themselves. There's perhaps even less detail here, though, than what we saw in the last chapter.

[21:17] So why mention it again? Well, because there is progression. Here we see that the fulfillment of prophecy against Eli's house is imminent and it's going to be utterly dreadful.

Verse 11. Then the Lord said to Samuel, Behold, I'm about to do a thing in Israel at which the two ears of everyone who hears it will tingle.

And then again in verse 13. I declare to him that I am about to punish his house. Time is creeping on and judgment day is looming.

That is the new material that Samuel gets that the man of God didn't get in the last chapter. And that judgment is going to be terrifying and utterly tragic for God's people. It will make your ears tingle, he says.

People won't be able to cope with the reports that are coming to them that they're hearing. And you can read about that in the next couple of chapters, what actually happens, how terrible and tragic a day it was.

[22 : 21] We're going to skip over them in the next couple of weeks because, well, Willie preached on them quite recently. But it would be worth your time going online and listen to him again. But just in case you don't, let me just give you a quick recap of what's going to happen.

The Israelites battle against the Philistines and they bring the Ark of the Covenant into battle with them because they think the sheer presence of the Ark being with them will turn the battle around in their favor.

They treat it almost like a rabbit's foot or a lucky charm. They think they can coerce God into fighting for them and bringing them victory. But he doesn't. And the result is that Hophni and Phinehas perish along with 30,000 Israelite men and the Ark of the Lord is captured.

It was a very, very dark day in Israel's history. It was ear-tingling stuff. Now Samuel, of course, wasn't given all the detail of what is going to happen in the vision.

But the message he received declared judgment on Eli's household. Something he might not yet have known was going to happen because remember, he wasn't privy to the conversation that happened in the chapter before.

[23 : 38] He didn't know that the man of God had already declared judgment on Eli's house. Now there are two things that we must note. First of all, the accuracy of Samuel's message.

how it matches up exactly with the man of God who comes before him. That and the fact that it actually comes to pass in the next chapter shows that he was a genuine prophet, that he really was reliable and he really was God's man who could really faithfully give God's word to his people.

But secondly, we also need to notice that God's people needed a prophet with a backbone too, who speaks the truth, even when it might not end up favorably for them.

And Samuel fits the bill for that too. Verse 15 makes clear that Samuel was afraid to tell Eli this vision that the Lord had given him. After all, who wants to tell their boss that they have dishonored the Lord and that in the near future, God will kill his sons and his family line will come into disrepute?

Answer? Well, certainly not me. Samuel's nervousness is to be expected, isn't it? It's quite understandable. I don't know if he would have got much sleep for the rest of that night knowing that he was going to have to tell Eli this vision in the morning.

[25 : 05] But when Eli prompts him to tell him what the Lord has disclosed to him and orders him not to hide any part of it from him in verse 17, that is exactly what Samuel does.

He doesn't waver from the truth because it's unpalatable. He doesn't pull his punches because the truth will offend his hearer. Samuel was a spokesman of God with steel in his spine.

And that's what God's people have always needed throughout the ages. There's no use God speaking to a prophet, a spokesperson, if they never declare those exact same words and apply it to the lives of God's people.

people. It's useless. And that's the example we get from Jesus, isn't it? He certainly didn't hold back the truth during his earthly ministry, didn't he?

He told people what they needed to know that they might repent. Remember how he treated the Pharisees. He called them whitewashed tombs, murderers.

[26 : 07] They were doing the will of their father, the devil. Jesus didn't mince his words. He told people exactly what they needed to know. He wasn't afraid to speak the truth for fear of offending.

And I think we should be thankful for the leadership here at the Tron and the preachers we have. Personally, I am very thankful for the preachers who preach here regularly, who don't aim just to massage us on a Sunday, give us a nice entertaining talk.

They tell us what we need to hear. even if they know it's going to rub us up the wrong way. Because let's be honest, we're all quite angular people, aren't we? We're all sinners.

We all don't like being told the truth. We all don't like living the truth either. We naturally are prone to live contrary to it. So we need preachers who are going to tell us directly what the Bible says and how it applies to our lives.

And we should be very thankful that we have that. So let's be thankful for what we have here at the Tron. Preachers who tell us what we need to hear. But let's also pray that the Lord would raise up men like this across our country.

[27 : 17] Because let's be honest, it is not normative. And for God's people to flourish again, his church to grow and to advance in the world, then God's word must be faithfully proclaimed to his people.

No punches can be pulled. Often our expectations regarding how people respond to God's word are quite off the mark too, aren't we?

Aren't they? Notice Samuel's afraid to tell Eli the vision. But also notice Eli's response in verse 18. It is the Lord.

Let him do what seems fit. Some will reject the words, God's word proclaimed to them. It will rub them up the wrong way. It will feel like a personal attack on them.

They won't be able to deal with the confrontation. But even those who are being confronted and even being told that judgment lies over them can often notice that the words been declared to them are true.

[28 : 23] It matches the reality. They know that God's word fits. I think we're often far more sensitive about how people are going to react to God's word than they actually are.

So let's be more bold, I think, in finding opportunities for our friends to hear God's word and not be so sensitive about passages we think might pose a problem to them.

In fact, if you never confront people with God's word, even these passages that sometimes we're a little bit embarrassed of in the world that we live in today, they may never actually repent.

They may never respond to God's word and live life by God's word instead of what's right in their own eyes like everyone in the days of the judges were doing. They might never prosper if you never have the boldness just to expose them to God's word.

It's a challenge, isn't it? And perhaps a very obvious application for you this evening would be to finally invite your friend to church who you've been meaning to invite for so long, but you've just been so nervous about what's actually going to be said from the pulpit.

[29 : 33] What's been said from the pulpit might be exactly what your friend needs to hear. And even if it's not and you feel uncomfortable sitting through this sermon, they might not be. Or perhaps even you need to be challenged into being that spokesperson for yourself, not just inviting someone along, but taking the word out to them.

Pick up the starter pack of word one-to-one and ask one of your friends to read it through with you. But the truth is our friends and our family will not come to saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ unless they hear God's voice in his word.

But it's only when God speaks that things happen. Just like when God created the universe, he speaks and it happens. There's new life. When God speaks, a work happens in the world and in the lives of his people.

So what I've been very challenged on this week as I've been preparing this is to stop tiptoeing around my friends, convincing myself that I'm laying essential groundwork all the time and never actually taking the plunge to inviting them to read the word one-to-one with me, not actually being open with the word with them.

Perhaps that's challenging to you too. God has graciously provided the word. It is the catalyst for transforming lives in this world.

[30 : 57] So let's actually use it. Well, finally, and more briefly, the prospect. An unprecedented future. Verses 19 to chapter 4, verse 1.

We see Samuel become an established prophet of the Lord in these last few verses of the chapter. The Lord was with him. Verse 19.

None of his words fell to the ground. All Israel knew that he was established as a prophet. Verse 20. From Dan to Beersheba. Right across the land.

Everyone knew Samuel was God's man. Now the temptation is to wonder, what's the big deal about that? Why is it so important for everybody to know Samuel?

Well, the answer comes in verse 21. And chapter 4, verse 1. The Lord appeared again at Shiloh, for the Lord revealed himself to Samuel at Shiloh by the word of the Lord.

[31 : 59] And the word of Samuel came to all Israel. Beforehand, remember verse 1, there had been no frequent vision, no words from the Lord.

And the nation was facing absolute catastrophe. There was no hope. God's people were stuck in a vicious cycle of being conquered and subjugated by other nations.

That's the pattern depicted in the book of Judges, isn't it? But now, at the end of this chapter, we have a permanent prophet in Israel who God is revealing himself through regularly.

Where once revelation, God's speech and guidance was scarce. Now it's frequent and enduring.

With the establishment of Samuel as a prophet and the recognition of that by all of Israel, well, there dawns a new day for Israel.

There's hope. They may not yet have the king that Hannah promised back in chapter 2. And Eli's disastrous household, the priests, have not yet been dealt with.

[33 : 08] But with the word of God ruling and reigning over God's people for the first time in centuries, there was unprecedented hope for the future. When God's word begins to reign over the lives of his people, the turnaround actually begins.

In the next chapter, the religious establishment will be overthrown and replaced. And not long after that, Israel will finally experience what it is like to live under a king, having that stability.

The scene is set for a big turnaround. And the return of the word of God is the catalyst for all those elements coming into place. It's a real change.

And you know, that has always been the case throughout all of human history. When God speaks and his people listen, things happen. Think of Abraham and the start of the nation of Israel.

Think about the rescue from Egypt under Moses. Think about the coming of the Lord Jesus. Jesus, God's word incarnate, enters the world after centuries of despairing silence for God's people.

[34 : 23] Within a few years, the world is turned upside down. I think in more recent history, think of the Reformation. Death, silence, no word of God all throughout Europe.

The word of God comes through Martin Luther. The spark is lit and the continent is changed. I think about us today.

We might despair about the apathy all around us, the increasing ignorance of our friends and family to God and his word. But you know, we have God's enduring word at our fingertips.

We have something that believers in Samuel's day never had. Or in Luther's day. We have greater access to God's word than people have had at any time in human history.

Even more so than the people who heard Jesus speak face to face. What we have is greater. And if we allow it to rule our lives, instead of just apathetically ignoring it, like we're all tempted to do, me included.

[35 : 30] If we allow it to get out into the open, not just from Dan to Beersheba, like here in Samuel's day, but from Clyde Bank to Easter House. Let it loose in the lives of not just ourselves, but our unbelieving friends and family.

I think the prospects are very exciting. We can rightly hope for unprecedented results. But the gospel is indeed yielding fruit to 30, 60, in some places a hundredfold all over the world where this is happening.

The key is just to get out there, have the confidence that it will do the work that God says it will do. So let's be bold together, shall we? Well, let me pray.

Father God, we confess that we really are blessed beyond measure in terms of our access to your word. And we also confess, Lord, our sin, that all of us here are so prone just to silence it.

It demands so much of our lives. It pushes us out of our comfort zone. It declares us to...

It demands that we take up our crosses, that we sacrifice our own lives for the sake of your kingdom.

[37 : 01] We pray, Father, you'd help us to stop silencing your word. Help us to apply it to our hearts and lives. Help us not to be so numb. Help tear the calluses off our hearts, we pray, that we might be a useful people in your world.

Give us boldness and confidence in your word, we pray. In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen.