

Hearing the Master's Voice

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 07 May 2006

Preacher: Bob Fyall

[0 : 00] Well, now we turn to those scriptures and to 1 Samuel, as we were studying this morning, and this time chapter 3. And if you're one of the church visitors' Bibles, you'll find that on page 227, page 227.

1 Samuel, chapter 3. 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. 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 God 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.

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, my son.

Lie down again. Now, Samuel did not call. 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 rose and went to Eli and said, Here I am, for you called me. Then Eli perceived that the Lord was calling the young man.

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.

[2 : 27] 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. 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.

But 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.

[3 : 33] 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. 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 Beersheba 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 word of the Lord. And the word of Samuel came to all Israel. Amen.

May God bless to us this his word. Well, it's good to be with you again. And I look forward to going through this chapter with you.

[4 : 37] Now before we do that, please, let's pray together and ask the Lord's help as we look together at 1 Samuel 3. And be still for the presence of the Lord.

The Holy One is here. And God our Father, we tremble before you. We tremble at the threshold of your word. We know you have things to say to us.

Things that we need to hear. And so we pray that in your grace you will open your word to our hearts and minds. And that you will open our hearts and minds to your word.

In the name and for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. And if you could have 1 Samuel 3 open, that would be a great help.

When I was a boy, there used to be a rather ridiculous rhyme, which is probably not known to present day children, which went something like this.

[5 : 45] Sticks and stones can break your bones, but words can never hurt you. Apart from being rather a piece of doggerel, it's nonsense, isn't it?

Because words can hurt you. Words can hurt terribly. Words can sting. Words can wound. I'm sure many of us have had the experience, even years later, you remember something was said.

Some unkind word. Some insult. Some insensitive remark. And before you know where you are, you are burning with anger, with shame, and with dismay.

Words are powerful. Words can be deadly. And of course the other side of that is, words can be powerful for good as well. Some months ago I visited the Churchill Museum, just next to the Treasury in London.

And it's a very moving place. And all around the various exhibits, you hear the great voice of Churchill and his inspirational speeches during the Second World War.

[6 : 52] Those great speeches about fighting on the beaches, fighting on the landing grounds, and so on. And in a sense, Churchill fought the Second World War with words, inspiring a nation when it was on its knees.

He's got allowing people to believe in the possibility of victory. Just as well he wasn't around now. Imagine Jeremy Paxman interviewing Churchill. Well, which beach is it you're going to fight on, Mr. Churchill?

Which landing ground are you going to make the stand on? Surely it's that kind of interviewing that's destroyed oratory and public speaking so much in our day. And when the words are the words of God, when the words are the living word of the living God himself, then these words change lives.

When we listen to the word of God, something always happens. When we listen to the word of God, we either smell the fragrance of Christ, and our hearts are one, our hearts are changed, or we smell the stench of death, and we detest it.

No one can simply listen to the word of God and remain neutral. And this chapter we've read is a chapter that is totally devoted to the word of God and to its power and impact, first of all, on a boy, a young man, and then its impact on the wider society.

[8 : 19] And of course, its greater impact, as it's gathered into Holy Scripture, as it becomes part of the canon and speaks to us today, not just to the people of Samuel's day.

The word of the Lord dominates the structure of the chapter. Verse 1, the word of the Lord was rare. Verse 21, which really ought to go on into the first part of chapter 4, the word of the Lord, or rather the Lord revealed himself to Samuel at Shiloh by the word of the Lord.

Like all good stories, this has a middle as well as a beginning and an end. And the middle, of course, is the main part of the story, verses 2 to 18.

We are drawn into that story as we listen to these words. Now what I've called, and I've called this tonight, hearing the master's voice. How are we going to hear the master's voice?

How are we going to distinguish it from the other voices that we hear? We are surrounded by voices. Voices from newspapers, voices from radio, television, the internet.

[9 : 26] Everywhere we are bombarded with people who either have something to say, or in most cases have to say something. And we listen to these voices, and how do we discern, how do we hear the master's voice?

How do we distinguish that from other voices? How do we see that from other voices?

And finally, the last verses of the chapter, 19 to 21, the word of God established. The word of God spreading.

The word of God having an effect. So first of all then, let's look at the word of God neglected in verse 1. Those of you who are here this morning, remember the great song of Hannah, where she praises God, who has intervened, intervened in her life, and is about to intervene in the nation's life.

But spiritual life is burning low. A few renewed individuals, and some triumphalist hymnody, does not in itself mean that the church of God is revived.

[11 : 02] There has been, in the last few years, a number of very good hymns indeed written. A number of contemporary hymns, some of them completely new hymns, some of them reworking of old hymns and new tunes.

That's wonderful, and we thank God for that. But that does not in itself mean that the whole life of the church of God, and the whole life of the nation is being transformed.

The problem is very straightforward. The word of the Lord was rare in those days. Amos, later on, speaks of a famine of hearing the word of the Lord.

Now, there can be two types of famine. One can be simply that the word of God is not being preached at all. That was the kind of famine that probably afflicted much of this country in the early years of the 20th century, when preaching tended to be homilies, and tended to be simply the kind of preaching that was anecdotal and full of blessed thoughts, but no substantial unfolding of the word of God.

Today, we are now in a situation where we, it's possible in most places now, to hear the word of God faithfully preached.

[12 : 24] And yet, we are in danger of another famine of the word of the Lord. Many people are turning their back on the living gospel. Many people are trying other things.

Many people are feeling that the preaching of the word of God no longer has its ancient power. And what does this lead to?

Look at the rest of the verse. The word of the Lord was rare. There was no frequent vision. When the word of God is rare, when there's a famine of the word of God, when the word of God is preached, we are not going to see with clarity, we are not going to see God.

We will not see God by neglecting the word of God. It doesn't matter how many pictures and images we use. If we neglect the word of God, we will have no vision of God.

Because this is the way that God has chosen to reveal himself. So the word of God is being neglected. It wasn't totally absent. If you're looking back in chapter 2, verse 27, there came a man of God to Eli and said to him, Thus has the Lord said.

- [13 : 33] An unnamed man of God. Now when in the Old Testament you come across the phrase, man of God, very common in the books of Samuel and Kings and some other places, what the writer is saying is, this is a figure calling people back to the words of Moses, which are the words of God.

Moses is the man of God. The words of Moses, what we call the Pentateuch, Genesis to Deuteronomy, this is the authority in Old Testament times.

There is no authority in Old Testament times that is superior to or bypasses that of Moses. And the prophets are raised up, not to give original ideas, but to take the ancient words of Moses, which of course are not ancient in one sense, only ancient in the sense they were given a long time before.

They are the living words of God and applying them to the contemporary situation. And this message is a message of judgment. This message is a message that God is going to judge his people.

When someone comes preaching judgment, that is a sign, never forget this, of God's mercy. When God sends people to preach judgment, God is calling his people back to him.

- [14 : 49] To preach judgment is not to be negative, is not to be the kind of person who is simply unpleasant.

To preach judgment is saying, God is angry, but God wants you to come back. And that is one of the signs of a true prophet. Now I don't mean that that is the only sign of a true prophet.

There are disagreeable people around. I mean, after all, some people enjoy this kind of preaching rather too much. I found, when I started my ministry, one very interesting thing, that people hated the preaching of grace.

If you told people that Jesus loves you unconditionally, they hated that. Because they wanted Jesus to love them because they were good, because they did good things.

They were great workers for the church and so on. But they loved the preaching of judgment because they always applied it to someone else. I wish so-and-so had been here to listen to that.

- [15 : 53] You've heard that before, haven't you? Or I hope she was listening. And I hope he heard that. That's the problem, isn't it? We've all kinds of ways of avoiding the word of God.

But the preaching of judgment and change is one of the signs of a true prophet. One thing a false prophet will never do is tell people they need to change.

Paul speaks to Timothy about people having itching ears, wanting teachers who will tell them what they want to hear, tell them that everything is well.

Amos, once again, warns against complacency. Woe to those who are complacent. Woe to those who are at ease. So the word is not totally absent. The word is there for those who wish to hear it.

But the other thing about the neglect of the word of God is it's perfectly possible for religion to go on, for the church to continue without the word of God.

- [16 : 52] Look at verse 7. Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him.

Now Samuel was an assistant in this temple in Shiloh. This, of course, is not the later temple that was built by Solomon. This was some kind of temporary structure which replaced the tabernacle which had been used in the desert.

And it's here that Samuel is serving Eli. He's in the church, if you like. He does not have a living relationship with God.

Now in his case, it's because he's never been taught. It's because he's never heard the Master's voice. It's a tragedy. There are many people who go to church week after week, year after year, and never hear the Master's voice.

There are an awful lot of people, older people, who have been in church, going to churches all their lives, and they lack assurance. In many cases, they're genuine believers, but they have never been in churches where the Word of God has been opened, where the Word of God has been expounded.

[18 : 02] And because of this, they lack assurance. Many young people never hear the Word of God. And because of this, they don't know how to live their lives. So Samuel is in that case.

He doesn't know the Lord, and he doesn't know the Word of God. Notice the parallel, verse 7. He didn't know the Lord. The Word of the Lord had not been revealed. The two are exact parallels.

And in the case of Eli's sons, Eli's wicked sons, they knew it and simply spurned it. Eli himself was simply afraid.

Eli knew the Word of God, didn't teach it, and didn't live by it. So the Word of God neglected. Once again, as we look out on our country, we can see evidence of all this, can't we?

Evidence of many people like Samuel, who have never heard the Gospel. There are many people who go to church and have never heard a clear exposition of the Gospel. Sadly, there are people in churches who preach a Gospel that is not a Gospel.

[19 : 06] And there are others like Eli, who actually personally believe in the Gospel, know the Gospel, but are terrified to preach it in case they offend anybody. And that's the situation here.

But it's into that situation that a new revelation of God himself is going to come. And that's the main body of the story in verses 2 to 18. Now notice how carefully the author builds up the picture.

He's got these details, which are both realistic details, details which sketch the scene very clearly before us, and yet they have deeper meaning. The kind of thing John so often does in his Gospel, states great realities like light, like wind and like water, which are of course the literal elements, but also point to the deeper realities.

Eli, whose eyesight, verse 2, had begun to grow dim so that he could not see. Now that was literally true, but surely it was spiritually true. Eli could not see.

Eli did not have his eyes opened to reality. Eli was someone who was blind. Rather like the risen Lord's words to the church in Laodicea, you think you are rich, and yet you are poor, miserable, naked, and blind.

[20 : 26] That's the situation here as well. But notice verse 3, by contrast, the lamp of God had not yet gone out.

The literal lamp burning in the temple was still burning. But surely this is saying that even in these dark conditions, there is still a witness to God.

And that points back, I believe, to that unnamed man of God, whom I mentioned already in chapter 2, and points to the call of Samuel, which is about to come.

And it's a reminder too, the lamp of God burning, a reminder of the bush that burned and was not consumed. A reminder of the fire on Mount Sinai, where the law, where the revelation of God was given.

Verse 4, Then the Lord called Samuel. This is the situation, and in that situation the Lord calls Samuel. God breaks the silence because he's found someone who will hear.

[21 : 28] Now, throughout the scriptures, there are many accounts of the calls of prophets. There's the famous one in Isaiah 6, where Isaiah has the great vision of the seraphim and the thrice holy God.

Jeremiah is called as well in chapter 1 of his prophecy. Moses himself is called at the burning bush. But this is unusual because this is the only place, as far as I'm aware, in scripture, where the voice of God is mistaken for the voice of someone else.

Characteristically, the Old Testament prophets, when they hear the voice of God, are terrified and want to run away. Jonah, of course, is the classic example of that. When Jonah hears the word, he immediately takes off to Tarshish.

Tarshish is not Spain, as some people think. It's a Hebrew word that means open sea. You see what's being said? When Jonah ran away from God, there was nowhere to go. He was just going nowhere.

Which is what happens when you run away from God. But here, the voice is mistaken for the voice of Eli. Now, why is that? Up to now, all Samuel had known was Eli.

[22 : 41] And imperfect, uncompromised, as Eli was, it was still possible for Samuel, whose ears were open and in whose heart the spirit was working, to hear that voice.

After all, I said already, there are many, many churches where the gospel is not clearly proclaimed. The Lord still speaks to people in those churches, sometimes by a word of scripture, sometimes by the preacher saying something better than he knew, and so on.

The Lord is, you know, the Lord does these kind of things surely to show us that he doesn't depend on us. After all, every preacher has a task to prepare thoroughly, to work hard, to pray hard, and to present the message as clearly as possible.

And every preacher, I'm sure, has had the same experience as I've had. You preach your heart out. You feel that no one could possibly be unmoved, and when you go to the door, you discover that no one except yourself has been moved at all.

Other times, you come down from the pulpit depressed, feeling you will never preach again. Sometimes these are the times when someone says, a word was spoken that helped me. I think when that happens, the Lord is saying, look, it's not you.

[24 : 00] It's not your mastery of ancient languages. It's not your gift of the gab. It's not the fact that you've done this and that. It's the fact that my spirit is working. Which is not, of course, an argument for saying, well, I'll just stand up and say what the Lord tells me to speak, tells me to say.

Because invariably, you'll find that with these people, the Lord never tells them when to stop. Because they're not trusting in the living word. But even through Eli, compromised, failing as he was, Samuel must have glimpsed and heard something which was preparing his heart.

Eli realizes that he has frittered away his time. And Eli realizes, to his credit, that this young man is being called.

And he tells Samuel to listen, verse 9. Therefore Eli said to Samuel, go lie down, and if he calls you, you shall say, speak, Lord, for your servant hears.

God can and does speak through imperfect humans. If that were not the case, no human being could ever present the gospel. Now, God's call to Samuel shows his patience, doesn't it?

[25 : 16] God calls and he gives us time to respond. Now, Samuel's response really comes in two stages. First of all, we have hearing and vision.

In verse 10, the Lord came and stood, calling as at other times, Samuel, Samuel. God called and God came and stood.

Now, if you like, the mechanics of this are not explained. We're not told in what way the Lord revealed himself. We're not told how this was shown to Samuel.

But he knew beyond doubt that the voice speaking to him was the voice of the Lord. The voice that had called Moses. The voice that had spoken at the Red Sea.

The voice above all that spoke at Sinai and gave the Torah, gave the commandments and gave the way to live. So there is hearing and there is vision.

[26 : 18] He hears and he sees. He doesn't hear everything, he doesn't see everything, but yet he knows beyond any doubt it is the Lord who is speaking. The word of God is sharper than any two-edged sword.

We sang that earlier on in that paraphrase of Hebrews that we sang earlier and when the Lord speaks, he speaks in a voice that is unmistakably his.

So the first stage is hearing and seeing. Now he could have stopped there. He could have stopped there and Samuel could have gone away and written his autobiography. He said, I have this wonderful vision and I have heard this wonderful revelation, but he doesn't.

He obeys. And what a thing he has to do. The first thing Samuel says to the Lord you've got to do is to go and tell your boss that he's got it wrong.

That he's been wasting his time. That he's been disobedient. And that he and his house are about to be judged. Now, we know for certain that Samuel is serious when he is willing to go and do this.

[27 : 28] Now, Eli was a priest and priests were raised up in ancient Israel to do two things. They obviously officiated at the temple sacrifices.

First of all in the tabernacle here at Shiloh and then later on in Solomon's temple. And this happened again after the exile when the temple was rebuilt in the times of Ezra and Nehemiah.

But there was another function and they were to teach the law. They were to teach the word of God. And at the very end of the Old Testament period, Malachi castigates them for doing neither of these things.

Says you've offered polluted sacrifices and you're not teaching people the word of God. And the prophets are raised up when the priests fail.

When the official establishment fails to do what they've been appointed to do, then God raises up prophets. prophets. And Samuel is one such figure.

[28 : 29] A powerful figure who stands in the line of Moses. In some of the Psalms, Samuel is mentioned in the same breath as Moses.

And then later on, of course, the titanic figure of Elijah is to be raised up followed by his disciple Elisha. But all through the books of Samuel and Kings we have many of these unnamed men of God who come to call the people back to God.

Eli had not only failed to follow what he knew to be right, as we saw this morning, he connived at sin. He connived at blatant sin and did nothing about it.

Eli, as I said this morning, failed to be the true shepherd, the shepherd who fights the wolf as well as feeds the sheep. Eli, without being vicious, and evil himself, allowed viciousness and evil to flourish.

So, this is the first message he's given. Imagine if you were called for the ministry and that was the first thing you were told to do, the first message you were asked to give, message of judgment.

[29 : 41] Poor Jeremiah had to preach that for 40 years in Jerusalem just as it was about to fall. It's not a happy thing to have to do and yet it's something we have to be prepared to do when we hear the master's voice.

Look at verse 12, and that day I will fulfil against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house from beginning to end and I declare to him 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. One of the great limitations of the whole sacrificial system you read about particularly in Leviticus is that it was for sins that were not blatant sins or high handed sins.

It was for the kind of sins, the kind of weaknesses and negligence. One of the prayers I learnt when I was working with Anglicans is asking the Lord to deliver us from weakness and negligence and our own deliberate fault.

Now Eli has committed a deliberate fault and there is no way back from that. This is what the New Testament calls the sin that has no forgiveness, the unforgivable sin.

[31 : 09] The kind of sin which if you are worried you have committed it, you certainly have not committed it because the unforgivable sin, the blatant sin is the sin which goes ahead and says I know perfectly well God doesn't approve of it.

I know it's against the word of God but I'm jolly well going to do it anyway. That is the sin which John talks about in his first letter. The sin for which he's asked people not to pray because it is blatant defiance against God, the sin against the Holy Spirit.

And Eli has gone beyond the point of no return. Now there's an interesting little verse, verse 17. Eli said, what was it he told you?

Do not hide it from me. May God do so to you and more if you hide anything from me of all that he told you. Samuel tells him everything and Eli says, it is the Lord, let him do what seems good to him.

Now some of the commentators look on that verse as a sign that Eli is actually a better person than we thought he was. This is a humble and dignified response.

[32 : 21] say some of the commentators. That doesn't seem to me to be borne out by the way Eli subsequently behaves. Nor is that the true response to the preaching of judgment.

Eli is virtually saying, oh well, what will be, will be, I know my numbers up, shrugging it off. This is not genuine repentance. He is using pious language to refuse to engage with God or with the truth about himself.

It is the Lord, let him do what seems good to him. When the prophets preach judgment, people repent. The men of Nineveh repented, says the book of Jonah.

As you know, Jonah didn't particularly like that. It's perfectly possible to preach and your words have an effect and then not like what the effect is. It's such an unpredictable thing, the word of God and what it will do to people.

Eli is not repenting. Eli is shrugging it off. Eli is behaving as if it didn't matter. Let him do what seems good to him.

[33 : 26] Of course, he's going to do that, whether Eli gives him permission to do so or not. So you see, the call of Samuel is a very, very powerful story because on the one hand, it is a marvelous example of God's grace.

God comes into this corrupt, compromised society. He makes sure the lamp of his presence and his word does not go out. He calls a new person to preach it and to proclaim it and yet his first message is a message of judgment.

Judgment is a difficult message to preach because judgment forces people to make up their minds. Most of us prefer to live in a comfortable haze and a comfortable fudge.

This kind of message makes that impossible. As Elijah was to say sometime later, Choose today whom you will serve.

If the Lord is God, follow him. But if Baal is God, then follow him. There is no middle ground there. There is no place for compromise. Just as on the last day there will be no middle ground.

[34 : 37] We'll either be for or we'll be against. And this is what the word of God is doing here. Glorious hope. For those who believe. Wonderful grace for those who turn to the Lord.

But stern judgment for those who persist in their rebellion. And in the next chapters we're going to read about how the sacred ark was taken into battle and captured because people had learned nothing.

They attempted to use it as a kind of magic. And that of course was impossible. Word of God neglected. And then this wonderful story of the word of God welcomed.

Now let's look at the final section. The word of God established. Verse 19 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 Beersheba knew that Samuel was established as a prophet of the Lord. Here was a voice that they could not ignore.

[35 : 38] Now notice the interesting parallel here. In verse 21 The Lord appeared again at Shiloh for the Lord revealed himself to Samuel at Shiloh by the word of the Lord.

Parallel to that the word of Samuel came to all Israel. Now it's very careful we see exactly what's being said here. The word of the Lord is not collapsed into the word of Samuel.

He's not saying that the words of Samuel and the word of the Lord are an exact parallel. Rather what is being said is that the eternal God is speaking.

He has found an instrument who will faithfully speak the words he has given. Samuel's words are Samuel's words. Just as Amos and Isaiah's words are Amos's and Isaiah's words.

The style of the prophets and all the other biblical writers are totally different. Luke tells us for example at the beginning of his gospel he had done his homework. He had read the other accounts.

[36 : 45] He had done his research. As he read these he puts it together in his own words which don't sound at all like Mark or John or Matthew. But because they are also the word of God there is a wonderful unity that comes through different individuals.

So Samuel speaks and God speaks through him. A good example of this in the New Testament as well in Acts chapter 10 Peter spoke these words says Luke and the spirit fell on all who heard the word.

In other words the word of God is speaking through the words of Peter. Now as the word is established notice two things. First of all that God honoured his word.

Verse 19 the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. That doesn't mean that everybody believed. Eli's sons did not believe and we learn that from the next two chapters.

What it means is that no one could ignore the fact that God is speaking again. The voice of God which had apparently been silent for so long. This is speaking again.

[37 : 58] And there are times when it appears that the voice of God is silent. Think of the gap between Malachi and John the Baptist for example. Silence falls until the Baptist stands by the banks of Jordan and says look he's here.

The one whom the prophets spoke about is here. It never means there's no voice at all. It does mean there are long periods when the voice of God appears to be sidelined.

Lives are changed here. God's word is active. All Israel from Dan to Beersheba knew that Samuel was established as a prophet of the Lord.

So God honoured his word. And the important thing for us is that we must be faithful whether we live in a time when God's word is honoured in the sense that large crowds are flocking to hear it, that people's lives are being changed, that wonderful things are happening, or whether we live at a time when the heavens seem to be silent, and when God seems to be absent.

Indeed, these are the more difficult times, are they not, to keep on preaching and teaching the living word, because we know that even if all Israel from Dan to Beersheba, all Britain from Land's End to John O'Groach doesn't hear the word of the Lord, that this word is still powerful and active.

[39 : 24] We need to be faithful. Our task is to be faithful and bring that word, but at the same time, we need to be strategic in our thinking. We need to take that word to where people will listen.

It seems to me in our society, we are living in a better time for people to hear that word than perhaps in more recent generations. We're living in a society that's fascinated by the Da Vinci Code, by all kinds of interests in spirituality and the occult.

God-shaped blank is very evident. The altars to the unknown God are all around us. We need to proclaim that word and surely the Da Vinci Code is one of those altars to the unknown God.

It's showing a hunger and a thirst for something beyond which only the gospel can fill. That's the first thing, God honours his word. But secondly, God revealed himself, verse 21, the Lord appeared again at Shiloh, for the Lord revealed himself by the word of the Lord.

How did God reveal himself? God reveals himself through that same word. No church and no Christian which neglects the word of God is ever going to have a revelation of God.

[40 : 41] He's ever going to have a vision of God. Because that's the way that God speaks. It's not that we worship a book. The Bible cannot save us. But the Bible points us to the living word, the Lord Jesus Christ, its great subject, who can and does save us.

So the way to know God, the way to see God, the way to see the word of God established is to devote ourselves to that word. How do we do that? Well, those of us who preach and teach must renew our commitment to that.

We must see that in times like the time of Samuel, like the time of Eli, not only is the word of God necessary, it's even more necessary, because nothing else will change, nothing else will change the church, nothing else will convert the world.

We must never confuse ways by which we reach out to the world as ways by which we become friendly, which of course we must do. These in themselves are only preparations for the living word to come into people's hearts and minds.

We must build bridges, but we must be careful to cross those bridges. Far too many people are building bridges that they never cross. Far too many people are identifying simple friendship with preaching the gospel.

[42 : 00] We need to be friendly, we need to be open, we need to be welcoming, but we need to preach the living word. And we need, if we are, perhaps we're not preachers or teachers, although all of us need to be able to share the word of God with our friends, our families, and those whom we meet, we need to have a greater commitment to reading, studying, praying our way through this living word.

And as I finish, I want to say this. 1 Samuel 3 is not saying, because we live in similar times, because we live in this winter, which is never Christmas, that a similar thing will happen in our day.

Far too often, triumphalist hymnody has called us to expect that. Now is the time for us to march upon the land, into our hands he'll give the ground we claim.

There is nowhere in scripture that promises that. What scripture does ask us to do is to be faithful, to preach the living word, to introduce people to the Lord Jesus Christ.

In his own good time, God will build his church, God will bless his church. We don't know when it will be, it's right to pray for that, but it seems to me it's wrong to say this is bound to happen, because it happened now.

[43 : 23] Our task is to be faithful, our task is to take Christ to the world. John Wesley, when he summed up his ministry said this, I offered Christ to them.

Surely brothers and sisters, we can do no more and we can do no less than offer Christ to the world. Let's pray. Amen. Let's pray. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.