

## “The Lamp of God”

**Introduction:** How many of you are “directions people?” That is, how many of you, when setting up a new television or laptop, or when getting ready to operate a new vacuum cleaner or chain saw, or when preparing to drive a new car or snowmobile, begin by first reading the directions? Conversely, how many of you just jump in and push the button, flip the switch, or turn the key and assume you’ll figure things out as you go along?! In either case, sometimes things happen as you go along when it’s important to have the directions handy. A couple of weeks ago, Iela was driving her car and a symbol appeared on the dashboard that she hadn’t seen before and didn’t recognize. So, she pulled the manual out of the glove box and looked through it until she learned that the symbol indicated a low tire pressure. It turns out that one tire had an issue that needed to be addressed. Had she not addressed it, had she ignored the light, or the manual, driving would soon have become dangerous.

We’re in a section of the Bible this fall when things had become dangerous for the people of God. We’re around 1,000 B.C., and as the author of Judges puts it, “In those days, Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit” (21:25). In fact, God’s people had been living as they saw fit for around 300 years, ever since entering the Promised Land. Things had gotten so chaotic that, as we saw last week, even the priests who served at the tabernacle had become corrupt. To make matters worse, the beginning of our reading today adds this ominous note: “In those days, the word of the LORD was rare.”

So, what are the people of God to do when they find themselves in the middle of a mess?! What the narrator wants us to know is that God does not, and has not, given up on his people, no matter how much of a mess they may find themselves in. What we see is that in the midst of chaos and confusion, God calls us to return to the manual, to his life-giving word. It “is a lamp for our feet, and a light on our path” (119:105). God calls us to both listen to his word, and to share it with others.

### I. A Voice in the Darkness

A. So let’s set the scene here. We pick up the action at a time when “the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the house of the LORD, where the ark of God was” (v. 5). We’re in a place called Shiloh, about 20 miles north of Jerusalem. And, we’re in what was called the tabernacle, or tent of meeting. This was a portable temple made in the days of Moses where the people went to meet with God. Samuel, the son of Hannah, was a young boy who was learning the ropes of serving God from the high priest, a man named Eli. As the scene opens, both Eli and Samuel are asleep, Eli had laid down in a side room and Samuel was somewhere near the ark, which housed a copy of the law God had revealed to his people through Moses. He was also close enough to Eli, who was nearly blind, should he need any help in the middle of the night.

B. Near the ark, a lamp was to be kept lit throughout the night. As Exodus 21:27 explains:

In the tent of meeting, outside the curtain that shields the ark of the covenant law, Aaron and his sons are to keep the lamps burning before the LORD from evening till morning. This is to be a lasting ordinance among the Israelites for the generations to come.

So, tending this lamp was likely a part of Samuel’s training. That it had not yet gone out meant that it was still dark; dawn had not yet come. This is what was literally going on, but it’s not too hard to

imagine some symbolism here as well. Eli, the priest who had not been able to control his corrupt sons, could barely see. Following him had been like the blind leading the blind. Both, suggests Jesus, in a later parable, will eventually fall into a pit (Lk. 6:39). Eli and his sons had not been leading God's people well. But the lamp that served as a symbol for God's word, was not yet extinguished; there was still hope for the people.

C. Such hope begins with a voice that comes into the darkness. It was the voice of LORD, calling Samuel, but it took a while for both Samuel, and Eli, to figure it out. Finally, Eli sensed what was going on and, next time he heard the voice, instructed Samuel to respond: "Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening." What we have here is God calling Samuel to be his prophet, to speak to the people on God's behalf. What we see is a God who has not forgotten his people, but, in the midst of the chaotic darkness of their lives, makes himself known, and seeks to bring order to their lives again. He does so first to Samuel, and then through Samuel, to his people.

## II. God's Living Word

A. As we step back for a moment and look at the bigger picture, what we see is yet another instance of the creative, transforming power of God's living word. To change the status quo, God sends his word. He did so in the beginning, through his word: "And God said . . ." ("Said" or "called" 14x in Ge. 1). It's as much as we're told about the creative process and maybe it's all we really need to know. Through his word, God brought order out of chaos, light out of darkness, fullness out of emptiness, life out of nothingness.

It is God's word that guides us through life and helps us grow, like a well-watered fruit tree, as the opening lines of the Psalms express it: "Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company mockers, but whose delight is in the law of the LORD, and who meditates on his law day and night. That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither—whatever they do prospers" (Ps. 1:1-3). Jesus picks up on this fruit theme in his parables of the sower, and of the vine and the branches (Lk. 8 and Jn. 15), where he makes it clear that it is his word that enables us to mature and bear fruit as his disciples.

It is God's word that exposes in us what we need God to heal. The writer of Hebrews puts it like this: "For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart" (He. 4:12).

Finally, when it comes to recreation, to renewing our sinful selves into a new creation, again it's God's word that is the moving force: "For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God" (1 Pe. 1:23).

In each case, the word of God is not something dead on a page; it is alive, it is organic, it is life giving.

B. And so in the midst of the darkness of Samuel's day, what did the people need most? They needed God's word, for it was rare. Not that it wasn't around. The word was in the ark right in the tabernacle, but the priests were not proclaiming it and the people had no interest in listening to it. God brought his word through a prophet. Notice what this word did. It first confirmed that the old, corrupt priesthood, which had treated God's means of sacrifice with contempt and so was beyond rescue, was on its way out. God's promise to clean house, as we saw last week, would come true, it

would not “fall to the ground.” Secondly, God’s word grew and transformed Samuel: “The LORD was with Samuel as he grew up . . . The LORD continued to appear at Shiloh, and there he revealed himself to Samuel through his word.” And then third, the word of God was spread through Samuel: “And all Israel, from Dan to Beersheba recognized that Samuel was attested as a prophet of the LORD. . . And Samuel’s word came to all Israel” (3:19-4:1). All Israel, from Dan to Beersheba, from north to south, recognized that God was doing a new thing through his prophet Samuel. He would be instrumental in bringing about a change in leadership, to that of a monarchy or kingship, which would continue to move forward God’s promise to restore and redeem the world through the ancestor of David, Israel’s greatest king.

### III. Listening Servants

A. So, this text certainly helps affirm for us the life-giving power of God’s word, and God’s practice of taking the initiative and speaking his word to into our chaos to bring order to it. But that’s only half of the equation. If God is speaking, are we listening, and responding? As we think about this for a moment, let’s notice where we are in the scope of redemptive history. We are no longer in the age of the prophets, but we have an even greater word--bringer, as the writer of Hebrews explains (1:1-3):

In the past, God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets [like Samuel] at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son . . . The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.

We saw last week that Jesus is the ultimate priest, and now we see today that he is also the ultimate prophet, the one to whom all other prophets point. He is the ultimate word-bringer, the Word of God made flesh (Jn. 1). With the arrival of Jesus what we find is that in general, God doesn’t speak to his people in visions, like he did Samuel; he speaks to us in his Son and through his Son’s word. Encouragingly, because of Jesus we have, Peter observes, “the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as a light shining in a dark place” (2 Pe. 1:19).

B. Don’t miss this last bit, the bit that calls us to pay attention. For, as Jesus reminded, in various ways, those who heard his teaching, “consider carefully how you listen” (Lk. 8:18). His parable of the wise and foolish builders drives the point home when he says that only those who both hear his word *and put it into practice*, will be building their lives on the foundation of rock that will hold up when life gets rough (Ma. 7:24-27). That is, the word can be a light for us in the darkness only if we are willing to both hear it and do it. The doing includes sharing what we hear and know with others in a way they can take it in. It includes speaking about the hope that we have in Jesus, as well as living out the love that Jesus has shared with us, as our lives are often the first “book” that others read about Jesus.

In these days of much confusion and chaos, when it seems as if everyone is doing as they see fit, may we say, along with Samuel, “speak Lord, for your servant is listening.” May we set aside time to listen, to both read, and to meditate on, God’s word. May we allow it to direct our life, and may we pray for opportunities to share it, in life-giving ways, with others.