

THE DAVID CHRONICLES IV: NO OPEN VISION

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INTRODUCTION:

And so we are expecting the rise of Samuel, and the fall of the house of Eli. Eli warned his sons of this, and a prophet warned Eli. And now the word of the Lord comes to Samuel for the first time, and it is a word that highlights the loneliness of a prophetic calling. The word of the Lord was rare in those days, and perhaps part of the reason is that those who carry that word are frequently in trouble.

THE TEXT:

“And the child Samuel ministered unto the LORD before Eli. And the word of the LORD was precious in those days; there was no open vision. And it came to pass at that time, when Eli was laid down in his place, and his eyes began to wax dim, that he could not see . . .” (1 Sam. 3:1-21).

SUMMARY OF THE TEXT:

Eli raised two worthless sons, but we must also recall that he is the one who brought up Samuel. Samuel ministered unto the Lord “before Eli” (v. 1). This was an era when there was a drought of prophetic utterance; there was no open vision (v. 2). And so it was that Eli laid down to sleep and he could not see (v. 3). This is speaking of nighttime, but it provides an apt metaphor as well—Eli could not see. Samuel was sleeping inside the sanctuary, where the ark of the covenant was, and before the lamps went out (perhaps early morning), Samuel was sleeping (v. 3). The Lord called to Samuel, who thought it was Eli calling him (vv. 4-5). The same thing then happened again (v. 6). We are then told the reason why Samuel was making this mistake—he did not yet know the Lord (v. 7). When this happened for the third time, Eli realized that the Lord was calling Samuel and so he told him what to do (vv. 8-9). The Lord came a fourth time, and Samuel did as Eli instructed (v. 10). This time the Lord stood there (v. 10).

The Lord gave Samuel a message of severe judgment, one that would make the ears of everyone who heard of it tingle (v. 11). He will lay waste to the house of Eli, and finish it off (v. 12). The Lord says that He warned Eli about his failure to restrain his sons who made themselves vile (v. 13). The sin committed cannot be addressed by sacrifice, but only by judgment (v. 14). Samuel lay (presumably awake) until morning, opened the doors of the house of the Lord, afraid to tell Eli what was said (v. 15). But Eli called to Samuel, just as the Lord had done, and as Samuel had thought he had done before (v. 16). Eli wants to know the message, and he charges Samuel solemnly to tell him everything and to not hold back (v. 17). And so Samuel tells him, and it appears that Eli responds well (v. 18).

Samuel grew, and the Lord was with him. Not one of Samuel’s words fell to the ground (v. 19). All Israel, from north to south, knew that Samuel had been established as a prophet (v. 20). The prophetic word came again to Shiloh through the ministry of Samuel (v. 21).

HE DID NOT KNOW THE LORD:

The text says that Samuel did not recognize the voice of the Lord (v. 7). Now the sons of Eli did not know the Lord either, but theirs was a moral problem. With Samuel, the issue was vocational; he did not know the Lord as a prophet would. Samuel is being established as a prophet here; the sons of Eli are in the process of being thrown down from their office. Moreover, we are told that Samuel comes to know the Lord in quite a remarkable way—like Moses had. The Lord calls three times. The fourth time it says that He came, and stood, and called as before (v. 10). A few verses later, this is called a vision (v. 15). This is an Old Testament theophany, an appearance of God. The chapter concludes with the Lord appearing again in Shiloh (a place already condemned), and revealing Himself to Samuel in Shiloh (v. 21).

THEIR EARS SHALL TINGLE:

One writer has aptly said that the God of the Bible is no buttercup. He promises such a severe judgment that the mere news of it will astonish those who hear of it (v. 11; 2 Kings 21:12; Jer. 19:3). When God judges the earth, He doesn't mess around. We who live in the times of the new covenant need to understand that to whom much is given much is required. The abundance of grace (which we have) ought not to make us complacent. Judgment of God's covenant people is judgment for despising His grace. Do not be high-minded, but rather fear (Rom. 11:20-21).

ACQUIESCENCE IS NOT SUBMISSION:

Eli appears to accept the prophetic word brought through Samuel. But this acquiescence is not the same thing as submission. Eli appears to be a good man, but deeply flawed. The appropriate response would have been to take the word of the Lord and immediately restrain his sons. God says that his sin was in not doing so—Eli acquiesces to his sons, and then he does the same thing with God. When the word of God comes to you, repentance often causes God to relent. Think of the inhabitants of Nineveh (Jon. 3:9). Think of the Corinthians (2 Cor. 7:11). Today if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts. Do not put it off. Obedience can only occur in the present.

THE PROPHETIC OFFICE TODAY:

Now that the canon of Scripture is completed, one aspect of the prophetic office has been completed. No one will arise in the Church today to be a new Jeremiah, or Isaiah, or Samuel, or Agabus. The library is completed. But this does not mean that God is done with prophets. The Puritans used to rightly identify the preaching of the Word as prophesying. John Knox was nothing if not a prophet. The words of God are still declared today. But in a time of "no open vision," they fall to the ground. When God establishes a prophetic word, all Israel knows it, from Dan to Beersheba, and the words go forth to accomplish what God has intended for it. Those words do not return void. When this happens, the people of God hear and heed. Our name for it is reformation and revival.