

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Double Calls - God called twice: Samuel, Samuel!

How would you like to be 100 years old?! How would you like to be the oldest living person? Amy Hulmes, who lives in Greater Manchester, is 113 years old and has been declared the oldest person on earth. She was 16 when the Wright brothers made their first flight and 25 years old when the Titanic sunk. She has lived in three centuries and in them witnessed a pace of change unparalleled in history.

As I thought about her long life, I wondered about how my life has been lived and how well I have served the Lord Jesus. Samuel, our subject this morning, lived a long life totally committed to serving God. It is a life which is marked by important relationships. First, there was Samuel's relationship with his mother Hannah - a relationship which teaches us about being prepared for God's service. Then there was Samuel's relationship with Eli - a relationship which teaches us how to serve God in the most difficult circumstances. Next, there was Samuel's relationship with Israel - a relationship which teaches us about the responsibility of serving God. Then there was Samuel's relationship with Saul - a relationship which teaches us how to cope with the disappointments of a life of service. Finally, there was Samuel's relationship with David - a relationship which teaches us about the blessing and victory which comes from serving God.

The story of Samuel begins at one of the darkest points in Israel's history. At the end of Judges we read, "In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did that which was right in his own eyes". We sometimes think our generation is just the same and often get disappointed and discouraged by the age we live in. Samuel was born into a nation which was turning its back on God. Outwardly the worship of God continued but Israel was spiritually and morally bankrupt. Against such a background Samuel is born. The life he went on to live demonstrated how God is able to prove His love and grace in a hostile world.

In 1 Samuel 1 we see how God begins to work. He does not start by dealing with a whole nation as He did years later when He sent the prophet Elijah. No, He begins in the heart of one childless woman - Hannah. Hannah's bitterness of soul caused by her inability to conceive drove her into God's presence to plead for a son and to promise, if that son were given, to give him back to God for the whole of his life. The condition of our hearts before God is a recurring theme in Samuel. Hannah "spoke in her heart", verse 13, and her prayer was heard. God changed Hannah's bitterness into great blessing by giving her the son she requested. She called him Samuel which means "Heard by God". I do not believe it is without importance that Samuel's birth was on the basis of Hannah's faith and his subsequent life on the basis of Hannah's obedience.

Hannah prayed to God for Samuel, she presented Samuel to God and then praised God. By God's blessing she produced more children. It is said that behind every great man there is a great woman. Samuel's story bears testimony to this belief. It also teaches us that the disappointments of life should always draw us to God, never drive us away from Him. And in drawing near we can discover His ability to bring blessing out of bitterness. Joseph discovered this and, after being reunited with his brethren who had sold him into slavery, said, "God sent me before you to preserve life". It is one of the hardest lessons to learn in our Christian experience, that the most difficult times in our lives are often opportunities to discover the greatness of God.

Hannah also leaves us with some important practical lessons about the relationship God wants us to have with our children. We are responsible to pray for them before they are even born and for the rest of their lives. We should not forget to praise God for them. We should be willing to sacrifice for them and have a lifelong commitment to them. This was the mother Samuel had and her devotion to him prepared Samuel for a life of service.

John Wesley records how that, when he was a child, his mother would always keep the best toys until Sunday. Instead of Sunday being a day which the Wesley brothers resented, their mother made it into a day to which they looked forward to and by her wisdom they were drawn to the Lord. The faith, devotion and wisdom of Christian mothers should never be underestimated.

Samuel's relationship with Eli was of a different kind. When we first meet Eli, he mistakes Hannah's spiritual behaviour for drunkenness. And we soon discover that God held him responsible for the appalling behaviour of his sons who held high positions as priests. In her obedience to God, it seemed Hannah had given her son into the hands

of Eli who lacked spiritual leadership and tolerated gross immorality in his own family. God held him responsible for the spiritual corruption at the heart of Israel's decline. But Hannah had not given her son to Eli, but to the God who had given Samuel to her. Hannah's faith was in God and God began to work in Samuel's heart.

In spite of being in such a difficult situation, Samuel grew in favour with God and men (2:26), a statement reminiscent of the Lord Jesus in Luke 2:40 and 52. In 1 Samuel 3:1, we learn that things were at such a spiritual low in Israel that God's word was rare. When God's word does come, it is to Samuel when he is still a boy. On the one hand, this is very condemning because there was no adult God could use. On the other hand, it demonstrates God was working in a new and fresh way. Samuel did not know God, nor had the word of God been revealed to him (3:7). And as God speaks to him, he mistakes it for Eli calling him. The old man eventually realises that God was speaking to the boy and gives him some wise advice, "Speak LORD, for Your servant hears." This attitude marked Samuel for the rest of his life. What God said he did. If we could discover the same childlike ability to listen and to do what God asks us, perhaps we should know more of His presence and power.

God's message to Samuel was not a happy one. It foretold the judgement of Eli's house. When Eli asks Samuel what God had said, the boy is not marked by a pride that God had spoken to him above all others, but with a sadness that He spoke in judgement. Like the Lord Jesus, Samuel's ministry was characterised by grace and truth. Following this meeting with God, we learn that "Samuel grew, and the LORD was with him" (verse 19), he was "established as a prophet" (verse 20) and "the LORD revealed Himself to Samuel" (verse 21). To be an effective servant of God we have to be prepared by and learn from the Lord directly. It is no good living our lives off other Christians' experiences. God's word has to have its effect in my heart so that I can fulfil His purposes in my life.

A new relationship begins in 4:1, "And the word of Samuel came to all Israel". Just when we think things cannot get worse, something more dreadful happens. 1 Samuel 4 begins with Samuel's introduction to the nation he was to serve for such a long time. It ends with the birth of Ichabod, which means "The glory has departed from Israel". The conflict between Israel and the Philistines, which is recorded in this chapter, culminates in Eli's sons, Hophni and Phinehas, bringing the Ark of the Covenant into battle at the demand of the elders of Israel. A disobedient nation cannot expect God's presence or blessing. If they were expecting a victory like the defeat of Jericho when the ark was a focus of blessing, they were tragically mistaken. Israel was defeated, Hophni and Phinehas were killed, the ark was taken and the shock of the news caused the death of Eli and the birth of Ichabod.

These awful events solemnly remind us of the folly of pretending to serve God outwardly when in our hearts and by our practice we are so far from Him. God would rather allow the ark to be taken than to be associated with the sin of His people. This is at the very heart of Samuel's life - God looks on the heart. In our hypocrisy, we can fool strangers, friends, even family and, more tragically, ourselves. But we can never fool God. This was the bitter lesson God taught Israel and one He will teach us if we take a similar path.

How the ark returned to Israel is a wonderful story which we do not have time to explore this morning. But the ark's return led to the people of God seeking God's blessing. Their return was led by Samuel. In 7:3, he says, "If you return to the LORD with all your hearts, then put away the foreign gods and the Ashtoreths from among you, and prepare your hearts for the LORD, and serve Him only; and He will deliver you..." Israel listened to Samuel and forsook the idols which they had worshipped.

The duplicity of the Israelites has a very important message to us. They had not stopped worshipping God and in their distress they prayed to Him. But they continued to worship idols. It is possible, and often at the root of our own spiritual weakness, for us to worship as Christians but have things in our lives, things which are effectively idols. It is surprising how many Christians devote immense amounts of time and energy to transient things like sport, entertainment, money and material possessions to the extent that the Lord takes a second or even a lower place in lives. I have to ask myself the question: what are the reasons for a lack of spiritual power and am I responding to the Apostle's John's warning, "Little children, keep yourselves from idols"?

Samuel was both a preacher and a man of prayer. He brought Israel together with the promise, "Gather all Israel to Mizpah, and I will pray to the LORD for you", 7:5. In verse 8 the people asked Samuel not to cease to pray for them and in verse 9 Samuel cries to the LORD and the LORD answers. Victory over the Philistines follows and afterwards Samuel erects a stone and calls it "Ebenezer" - thus far the LORD has helped us.

Psalm 99:6 reminds us that Samuel was a man of prayer whom God answered. Throughout the days of Samuel, and because of Samuel's intercession, the LORD protected Israel from the Philistines. Prayer is a great means of protection and we should never forget to pray for each other and for all people. Samuel served God all the days of his life and he did it from the basis of his own home. At the end of chapter 7, we learn his home was at Ramah and there he built an altar. We cannot have a ministry to others unless we have a strong spiritual base ourselves - a Christ centred home. From his home Samuel served the nation travelling in a circuit from Bethel, Gilgal and Mizpah. Bethel was the house of God where Jacob first received the promises of grace and set up the stone, which had been his

pillow, to mark the place. Gilgal was the place where twelve stones were erected in memorial of the children of Israel being taken over the Jordan into the Promised Land. It was here, too, the Israelites were circumcised and separated to God as a holy people. Mizpah was the place where Jacob and Laban raised another heap of stones to mark the covenant between them and the place where Jacob returned home. Mizpah was the place, in verse 7, to which Samuel called upon the Israelites to return to God and where God blessed them. These three themes of God's grace, holiness, and blessing marked the ministry of Samuel.

Samuel who had served God so faithfully knew disappointment. First, in his own family when his children failed to follow in their father's footsteps and became dishonest. It is remarkable that God judged Eli for the failure of his children but never judged Samuel although his children dishonoured God. God will hold us responsible for how we bring up our children but ultimately they are responsible for their own behaviour. Eli had been unfaithful and Samuel faithful in their homes. How have we brought up our children?

The failure of Samuel's children as judges led to Samuel's next disappointment - Israel's request for a king. Samuel's answer was to pray. He is faithful to the end he warns them of what having a king will mean. Samuel pleaded with the people not to take this step but, having had the joy of leading the people back to God, he now experienced the bitterness of having his spiritual advice ignored. God tells Samuel to give them a king. So begins the next important relationship of Samuel's life - his relationship with Saul whom, in chapter 10, he anoints as king of Israel. Saul is symbolic of man's view of things. At the beginning of chapter 9, Saul is described as a mighty man of power, more handsome than anyone else in the Israel and head and shoulders taller than the rest of the people. All this appealed to the people then as it does today. We are more interested in the surface rather than the substance. But God also intervened to give Saul other advantages. He gave him another heart and the gift of the Spirit (10:9-10) and Saul was also marked by humility (10:22) and a following of faithful men "whose hearts God had touched," (10:26). Success followed. Soon Saul is established as king over God's people with the support of God's servant, Samuel.

In chapter 12, Samuel addresses the people of God and faithfully records his own witness and their failure. He demonstrates God's power in nature in verses 17-18 to show their dependence on the Lord. The people ask Samuel to pray for them. The tender heart of this old servant of God is summed up in verse 23, "Far be it from me that I should sin against the LORD in ceasing to pray for you; but I will teach you the good and the right way." The mark of a true servant of God is the care he will always have for the people of God in spite of the failure that so often characterises them. A true shepherd never forsakes the flock.

What is so touching about the story of Samuel and Saul is Samuel's spiritual care for the first king of Israel. As he had interceded for a nation, so he did for his king. The following chapters of 1 Samuel record some of the history of Saul's reign including his subsequent disobedience and God's rejection of him as king. This is summed up in chapter 15 in Samuel's words to Saul, "Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD. Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams...because you have rejected the word of the LORD, He also has rejected you from being king." These words are key stones of Samuel's service. His very existence was on the basis of his mother's obedience and the basis of his service was listening to and obeying the word of God. He was prepared to confront a nation and a king rather than dishonour his God. His life teaches us how vital obedience is. The Lord Jesus says in John 14:15, "If you love Me, keep My commandments". Saul was never to see Samuel alive again yet the old servant of God mourned for the king. Once more the features of grace and truth are seen in Samuel. He was always faithful to the truth of God yet never ceased to act in a gracious way to the people of God.

But sometimes we can be too soft hearted. Samuel became too obsessed with Saul's failure as king and the time had come to move on. And here begins the final relationship in Samuel's long history of service - his relationship with the greatest Old Testament king of Israel - David. God tells Samuel at the beginning of chapter 16 to go to the house of Jesse to anoint a new king. The story is a famous one. Samuel arrives and is introduced to Jesse's sons. Samuel is impressed with the fine young men placed before him. And the old prophet learns afresh how God chooses his servants. God's view is given to us in verse 7 in His words to Samuel, "Do not look at his appearance or at his physical stature, because I have refused him. For the LORD does not see as man sees; for man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart". Samuel, in his disappointment over Saul, looked for a similar replacement. And God took him right back to the roots of his existence - in his mother Hannah's heart. You remember in 1 Samuel 1, it said Hannah spoke in her heart and the Lord remembered her. Now years later, the son God gave Hannah was an old man full of disappointment at the failure of the people of God and their king. Samuel was temporarily blinded to the way God works. In grace God speaks to His servant's heart to remind him that it is into our hearts that God looks and from where He will always begin to work.

There was one more son of Jesse, David. Where was he? Keeping his father's sheep. It has always appealed to me that when Saul was discovered he was looking for his father's donkeys which, incidentally, he never found but were found for him. But David was absent from the line up of Jesse's sons because he was keeping his father's sheep. The man who was to become the shepherd king of Israel, who would defeat Goliath with a stone from his shepherd's

sling, and who would write, "The LORD is my shepherd" is introduced to us as keeping his father's sheep. Samuel had the joy of anointing a new king and was also alive to see David's victory over Goliath in the valley of Elah (chapter 17). Later, when David is persecuted by Saul, he goes and stays with Samuel at his house at Naioth in Rahmah (19:18). There David unburdens his heart to the old servant of God. What did Samuel say to him? He may have told about his own beginnings, the times God spoke to him, about the responsibility and the disappointments of serving God. I am sure he would have told him how God looks on our hearts and that blessing and victory come by faith and obedience. What we do know is that God was later to say of David in Acts 13:22, "I have found David the son of Jesse, a man after My own heart, who will do all My will."

Samuel, at the end of his long life of service, had the joy of knowing God's blessing and victory as he encouraged David in his future role. As we look at our own service, may God give us the grace to know the importance of being prepared by Him, the determination to serve Him in the most difficult of circumstances, the strength to undertake responsibility, and the wisdom and patience to deal with the disappointments we will inevitably face. Finally, may He give us the joy of experiencing His blessing and victory in serving our Lord and Master and encouraging our fellow Christians.

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