

Samuel to King David

The Lord speaks to Samuel, 1st Samuel 3

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The New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

Samuel the man of God

Chapters one and two of first Samuel have clearly established that Samuel's parents are from the tribe of Ephraim, one of Joseph's sons. So Samuel was not descended from Aaron's family, and not even from the tribe of Levi. Therefore, he had no right to function as a priest, you needed to be a descendant of Aaron for that, or as a Levite. In brief, he should not have been able to participate in administering the offerings of God, or the service of the tabernacle in any way. And yet in our chapter for today Samuel is clearly living and working in the tabernacle, and later chapters of 1 Samuel will detail how he regularly offered sacrifices. Although this is never explicitly stated, it is presumably the fact that he was given by his mother to God, and by extension to Eli, the high priest, that allowed him to function as a priest.

As if this what not enough for one man, our chapter today records how Samuel started his career as a prophet of the LORD, a role he continued to fulfil all his life. Indeed, Samuel might be considered the first of the great line of prophets that included men like Elijah and Elisha, Isaiah and Jeremiah.

Chapters four to seven set out how Samuel became the judge of Israel. In fact, he was the last man to act as a judge of Israel before the period of the kings. Samuel was also the man whom God chose to anoint the first two kings of Israel, Saul and David! Whatever way you look at it, Samuel is a pivotal character in the Old Testament, and therefore in the events moving towards the coming of Jesus, the Messiah.

But every great man of God must start somewhere, so let's go back to Samuel as a young boy in 1 Samuel chapter 3.

An outline

I am going to deal with the chapter in six sections:

vv.1-3: Setting the scene

vv.4-8: God speaks

vv.9-10: Understanding dawns!

vv.11-14: A tough first message

vv.15-18: The message delivered

vv.19-21: Samuel's future career summarised

1. Setting the scene

The first three verses will give us some helpful background.

“Now the boy Samuel ministered to the LORD before Eli. And the word of the LORD was rare in those days; there was no widespread revelation. And it came to pass at that time, while Eli was lying down in his place, and when his eyes had begun to grow so dim that he could not see, and before the lamp of God went out in the tabernacle of the LORD where the ark of God was, and while Samuel was lying down” (1 Samuel 3:1-3).

The first verse introduces the three main characters of this chapter: Samuel, Eli and the LORD. Samuel commences his work for God while he is still a young boy. Eli is the high priest, to whose care Samuel has been committed by his mother Hannah. He is a very imperfect man, as we shall soon see, but he is the source of most of Samuel’s knowledge of God, and the person to whom Samuel looks for direction. The LORD, that is, Jehovah, the covenant keeping God, should have been prominent in the thoughts and lives of His people Israel; but, at this time, the word of God was rare. It was about to become much more frequent! We are told there was no ‘widespread revelation’ of God. This indicates the unhealthy spiritual state of God’s people. [It has echoes in Psalm 74 which starts with the lament, “O God, why have You cast us off forever”, and, in verse 9 says, “We do not see our signs; there is no longer any prophet; nor is there any among us who knows how long.” In a similar vein, Proverbs 29:18 reads, “Where there is no revelation, the people cast of restraint.”](#)

Eli is said to be lying down and going blind. These statements are true both literally and spiritually. Physically, Eli was lying down to sleep for the night, and his sight was failing as he grew old. But Eli was not one of those people who maintain spiritual vigour as they age. His experience and understanding of God were showing signs of extreme drowsiness, and his spiritual eyesight was very poor.

We are told that the events of this chapter occurred, “Before the lamp of God went out in the tabernacle.” This is strange, because the direction that God gave to Moses for Aaron and his successors was that the lamp was never meant to go out. It is not clear whether the expression refers to the loss of the ark and the resulting chaos that will occur in the next chapter, or the poor practices of Eli and his two wicked sons. Either way, it is another indicator of the poor spiritual state of Israel at this time.

Like Eli, Samuel is also lying down, but I don’t think this indicates any failure on Samuels part. Even though we have already noted that Samuel was an assistant to, and a learner from Eli, the things that are about to happen show that Samuel had a very different character to his mentor. Perhaps we can see in the location of Samuel’s bedroom, something of how Samuel is making his home in the presence of the God that he is about to get to know on a personal level.

2. God speaks

In these unpromising circumstances, God Himself is about to intervene. Let’s read our second section of the chapter.

“The LORD called Samuel. And he answered, ‘Here I am!’ So he ran to Eli and said, ‘Here I am, for you called me.’ And he said, ‘I did not call; lie down again.’ And he went and lay down. Then the LORD called yet again, ‘Samuel!’ So Samuel arose and went to Eli, and said, ‘Here I am, for you called me.’ He answered, ‘I did not call, my son; lie down again.’ (Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, nor was the word of the LORD yet revealed to him.) And the LORD called Samuel again the third time.

So he arose and went to Eli, and said, 'Here I am, for you did call me.'
Then Eli perceived that the LORD had called the boy" (1Samuel 3:4-8).

You might have thought that when God spoke there would be instant illumination, but at first there is only confusion. Eli misunderstands the situation, and Samuel's own understanding and knowledge of God, and His voice, are not yet developed. [All of this is a long way from how Isaiah responds to hearing God speak in Isaiah 6:8, where we read, "Also I heard the voice of the LORD saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?' Then I said, 'Here am I! Send me.'"](#) Samuel still has much to learn!

When Samuel hears the voice speaking in the night he goes straight to Eli. This is perfectly understandable; Eli is the most likely person to be calling to Samuel, and Samuel has always been ready to listen to the old man, and receive instruction from him. The problem is that, although Eli, as high priest, has been well placed to give the lad instruction in all the practical things of the tabernacle system of offerings and the theoretical knowledge of the Law of God, his own spiritual senses are now growing very dim, and he fails to recognise what God is doing. But God is persistent and determined to make His voice heard and to make Himself known to Samuel. So, in verse six, we have a repeat of God speaking and Samuel and Eli failing to understand. Verse seven makes plain that Samuel doesn't yet know the LORD or the clear revelation of His word. This is a very different lack of knowledge from what we have in verse 12 of the previous chapter which says of Hophni and Phineas, "The sons of Eli were corrupt; they did not know the LORD." Their lack of knowledge was caused by wilful disobedience to God and His revealed will.

Our chapter says that Samuel "did not yet know the LORD, nor was the word of the LORD yet revealed to him." Samuel's lack of knowledge was temporary and about to be remedied! In verse 8 God calls to Samuel a third time and things start to turn a corner. Samuel still thinks it is Eli who is speaking, but he is now more insistent that he has been called and seems unwilling just to be sent back to bed again! Light finally starts to break through Eli's dim eyes, and he realises, at last, that God is calling the boy. Perhaps he wonders in his heart why God is speaking to this young lad, rather than himself, the chief priest and the long-time judge of Israel.

Let's push on to our next section.

3. Understanding dawns!

"Therefore Eli said to Samuel, 'Go lie down; and it shall be, if He calls you, that you must say, "Speak, LORD, for Your servant hears.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place. Now the LORD came and stood and called as at other times, 'Samuel! Samuel!' and Samuel answered, 'Speak, for Your servant hears'" (1 Samuel 3:9,10).

Eli was not a very wise man, but he does offer wise counsel to Samuel at this point. We sometimes see everything, and everybody, in very black and white terms. Situations, or people, must be either all bad or all good. Things are rarely that simple. Eli has made some terrible choices in his life, and he, and his descendants, are about to pay a very high price for them, but at this moment he perceives something of the purpose of God and gives good guidance. God sometimes uses unexpected people to speak to us. Samuel remains obedient to Eli and does as he is told. Obedience is a very significant part of Samuel's character.

God, with the patience and persistence which He so often shows to us (!), now calls Samuel once again. Indeed, He calls Samuel's name twice, making him part of the select group of seven people in the scriptures whom God called by name twice. [For the record the seven are: Abraham, Jacob, Moses and Samuel in the Old Testament, and Martha, Simon \(Peter\) and Saul in the New Testament; so Samuel sits in the middle of the list.](#) Clearly God has a special purpose for Samuel,

but how will he respond? If we are being picky, Samuel's response is less than perfect. The phrase Eli suggested was, "Speak, LORD, for Your servant hears." What Samuel actually says is, "Speak, for Your servant hears", i.e., Samuel misses out the name of the LORD. It's a small omission but quite an important one! If Samuel had spoken that way in years to come, when he had been following God closely for a long time, the LORD might have picked him up on the implied lack of respect and deference. Since Samuel is still a young boy, having his first experience of hearing God speak to him personally, God graciously passes over the blunder. There is a lesson for us here in the way we treat younger people when their public prayers or statements are not quite perfect. Sometimes a gentle word of advice might be appropriate. Sometimes the mistake may be best left unremarked. Samuel will have enough challenges with the message God is about to give him as our next two sections will show. Time for section four.

4. A tough first message

"Then the LORD said to Samuel: 'Behold, I will do something in Israel at which both ears of everyone who hears it will tingle. In that day I will perform against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. For I have told him that I will judge his house forever for the iniquity which he knows, because his sons made themselves vile, and he did not restrain them. And therefore I have sworn to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be atoned for by sacrifice or offering forever'" (1 Samuel 3:11-14).

I can find two other Bible passages where God says that the message He is about to give will make the listeners' ears tingle. They are 2 Kings 21:12, which pronounces judgement of Judah's most wicked King, Manasseh, and Jeremiah 19:3, which declares judgement and exile on Judah as a nation. Evidently, this is an expression God uses to signify very serious instances of His judgement on individuals or people. The Bible contains very many messages of judgement, so if only three are said to be 'ear-tingling', they must be of particular note.

This is not the first time God has spoken about Eli's failures and the judgement that will fall on them. In the previous chapter, verses 27 to 36, God sent an unnamed 'man of God' to warn Eli of God's impending judgement on him, and the reasons for it. Presumably, Eli had done nothing to rectify the situation since that message was given, so God now confirms and underlines the condemnation via Samuel. The root of the problem is Eli's two sons, Hophni and Phineas, and their vile actions, detailed in chapter two verses 12 to 17, and also verse 22. Eli did not act in these wicked ways himself, but he knew very well what his sons were doing and did nothing to restrain them. [Given that chapter 4 verse 18 tells us that Eli had grown fat, it seems fair to assume that Eli ate some of the sacrificial food that his sons were stealing from God and the people.](#) Evidently, we can be held responsible by God, not just for our own actions, but for the actions of others that we condone, or fail to oppose when we should do so. Especially if, like Eli, we are in positions of authority and responsibility.

Verse 14 makes plain that the judgement being announced is certain and perpetual, and there is now no way back. This reminds me of the significance of repeatedly refusing the Gospel of God in our own day. God is wonderfully gracious and will save and forgive people who have rejected and opposed Him for many years, but, ultimately, there comes a day when God takes a person's persistent rejection of Himself and His gospel seriously, and then there is no other sacrifice or offering that will be of any value. "What will a man give in exchange for his soul?" (Mark 8:37) Jesus asks. Put simply, the moral of this story is that nobody should push God's patience too far!

That is some first message for a boy to deliver! Our next section shows us how he went about it.

5. The message delivered

“So Samuel lay down until morning, and opened the doors of the house of the LORD. And Samuel was afraid to tell Eli the vision. Then Eli called Samuel and said, ‘Samuel, my son!’ He answered, ‘Here I am.’ And he said, ‘What is the word that the LORD spoke to you? Please do not hide it from me. God do so to you, and more also, if you hide anything from me of all the things that He said to you.’ Then Samuel told him everything, and hid nothing from him. And he said, ‘It is the LORD. Let Him do what seems good to Him’” (1 Samuel 3:15-18).

Having heard the first message which God has committed to him, Samuel goes back to bed. I suspect he didn't sleep very well with those solemn words about the man he had served almost as long as he could remember ringing in his ears! There would be the excitement of meeting with the LORD and hearing Him speak for the first time in his life. But there must also have been the worry of what on earth he was going to say to old Eli, who was bound to ask if God had spoken to Samuel again and, if so, what He had said.

The first thing that we are told Samuel did the next morning was to open the doors of the house of the LORD. [The tabernacle had only curtains, not doors, so presumably there was some kind of hybrid structure in use at this time, many years before the temple would be built.](#) I see four things worth noticing in this opening of the doors.

1. This would appear to have been Samuel's routine practice every morning. In times of stress and difficulty, good Christian habits, such as regular Bible reading and routine attendance at church, can be very helpful to us. Just doing the right thing because that is what we are accustomed to doing, without having to think too much about it, can be very important.
2. It was a rather small job, but a worthwhile piece of service for God and His people. Samuel continued doing it even though he might now have thought himself to be a genuine prophet and above such menial tasks. God always appreciates small acts of service done for Him, even if nobody else notices.
3. You might say that in opening the doors Samuel was enabling access to God. Samuel's whole lifetime of service as a priest, prophet and judge was about enabling people to have access to the word and presence of the LORD, so his task as a door-opener was good preparation! What about us? Does what we do help people to come into God's presence?
4. The actions of Samuel and their effects are in complete contrast to those of Hophni and Phineas. The activities of those two men around the door of the house of God, and what they did in it, repelled the nation from the offerings of God. Which pattern will we follow?

Unsurprisingly, Samuel is afraid to deliver the message to Eli and makes no attempt to do so himself. Eli really does call Samuel this time (!) and Samuel, as ready to respond as ever, replies with his habitual, “Here I am.” Eli asks Samuel directly what God has said to him. It must have felt a little humiliating for the old man, with the responsible position to ask the young boy what God had to say. Eli appears to have suspected that the message would not be a happy one for him. This may have been partly due to the fact that Samuel had not come straight out with the message himself; but the fact that he had previously received the warning from the unnamed man of God must have prepared him for bad news. [When Eli says, “God do so to you, and more also, if you hide anything from me”, he is using a figure of speech that we find a few times in the Old Testament. It means something like, ‘May what has been said happen to you, if you do not tell the truth.’ It is another clue that Eli was not expecting good news!](#)

Thus instructed by Eli, Samuel simply passes on the message in full. Sometimes it is best to be honest and tell the whole truth, without 'polishing' the story, or 'spinning' the message like a politician. We may be tempted to try and polish, or soften, the gospel message at times; emphasising the good news elements and playing down the bits about sin and judgement to come. They are all parts of the one gospel and we shouldn't be tempted to hide the pieces we think our audience might find uncomfortable.

Eli accepts that the message is from the LORD, and acknowledges that God is free to act as He chooses. To his credit, he doesn't blame Samuel for the message, but, sadly, neither is there any evidence that it caused him to start dealing with his sons and their wickedness.

We are left with one final section of today's chapter.

6. Samuel's future career summarised

"So 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 had been established as a prophet of the LORD. Then the LORD appeared again in Shiloh. For the LORD revealed Himself to Samuel in Shiloh by the word of the LORD" (1 Samuel 3:19-21).

No doubt Samuel grew both physically and spiritually. The LORD was with him because Samuel was faithful, he continued to listen to God and pass on the words that He had to say. There are quite a few parallels between Samuel and the Lord Jesus in this account. It is said of the Lord, "[He] grew in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man" (Luke 2:52 NIV). The LORD was certainly with His Son, Jesus as He walked through this world. When it says of Samuel that God, "Let none of his words fall to the ground", again we are reminded of the Lord Jesus.

The process at work in Samuel's prophetic ministry was:

1. Samuel listened to God speaking
2. Samuel faithfully passed on the message to the people without omission or embellishment
3. God confirmed everything that Samuel said

The third point is underlined in 1 Samuel 9:6 where Saul, speaking about Samuel, says to his servant, "Look now, there is in this city a man of God, and he is an honourable man; all that he says surely comes to pass." What a lovely testimony to the character and work of Samuel!

So Samuel is confirmed in his role for God before the whole nation of Israel. Dan was a city in the north of Israel and Beersheba was located in the south, with mostly open land further to the south before the border with Egypt. Deuteronomy 18:21,22 state that a genuine prophet can be recognised when what he prophesies actually happens. Samuel certainly passed that test! It's a good example of what can happen when we listen faithfully to God and speak out truthfully for Him.

What a contrast between the first and last verses of our chapter! We go from the word and revelation of God being rare, to God speaking and revealing Himself regularly to Samuel. Shiloh had been established as the location of the tabernacle, and therefore the centre for worship, back in Joshua's day – read Joshua 18:1 to 10 for the account. Shiloh remained the centre throughout the time of the judges; Samuel being the last judge. The next chapter will see the ark captured, and it appears that Shiloh was destroyed at that time. Psalm 78 and Jeremiah 7 give us a little more detail.

Samuel continues to be faithful to God and to listen to Him, so God continues to speak both to and through Samuel. What about us in our day?

Heavenly Father, we give thanks for the good example of Samuel that you have caused to be recorded for us in Your word, the Bible. We need to know You personally and to listen carefully to what You have to say. We also need to be ready to speak to others. Whether we are younger or older, have some responsibility and authority or none at all, we won't be able to do any of those things without Your strength and the power of the Holy Spirit. Please make us more like Your Servant Samuel, Amen.

Thank you for listening to this truth for today talk on 1 Samuel 3 – The Lord speaks to Samuel, talk number T1279.

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