

## 1 Samuel 3

The boy Samuel ministered before the LORD under Eli. In those days the word of the LORD was rare; there were not many visions.

<sup>2</sup> One night Eli, whose eyes were becoming so weak that he could barely see, was lying down in his usual place. <sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> Then the LORD called Samuel.

Samuel answered, "Here I am." <sup>5</sup> And he ran to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me."

But Eli said, "I did not call; go back and lie down." So he went and lay down.

<sup>6</sup> Again the LORD called, "Samuel!" And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me."

"My son," Eli said, "I did not call; go back and lie down."

<sup>7</sup> Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD: The word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him.

<sup>8</sup> A third time the LORD called, "Samuel!" And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me."

Then Eli realized that the LORD was calling the boy. <sup>9</sup> So Eli told Samuel, "Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place.

<sup>10</sup> The LORD came and stood there, calling as at the other times, "Samuel! Samuel!"

Then Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

<sup>11</sup> And the LORD said to Samuel: "See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make the ears of everyone who hears about it tingle. <sup>12</sup> At that time I will carry out against Eli everything I spoke against his family—from beginning to end. <sup>13</sup> For I told him that I would judge his family forever because of the sin he knew about; his sons blasphemed God,<sup>[a]</sup> and he failed to restrain them. <sup>14</sup> Therefore I swore to the house of Eli, 'The guilt of Eli's house will never be atoned for by sacrifice or offering.'"

<sup>15</sup> Samuel lay down until morning and then opened the doors of the house of the LORD. He was afraid to tell Eli the vision, <sup>16</sup> but Eli called him and said, "Samuel, my son."

Samuel answered, "Here I am."

<sup>17</sup> "What was it he said to you?" Eli asked. "Do not hide it from me. May God deal with you, be it ever so severely, if you hide from me anything he told you." <sup>18</sup> So Samuel told him everything, hiding nothing from him. Then Eli said, "He is the LORD; let him do what is good in his eyes."

<sup>19</sup> The LORD was with Samuel as he grew up, and he let none of Samuel's words fall to the ground. <sup>20</sup> And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba recognized that Samuel was attested as a prophet of the LORD. <sup>21</sup> The LORD continued to appear at Shiloh, and there he revealed himself to Samuel through his word.

### When God comes calling

We've just read the fairly well known story of the Lord calling to Samuel. This marks the beginning of Samuel's rise as a prophet, a significant figure in Israel's history. It also marks the fall of Eli's fortunes too. Firstly, how does this compare to the calling of other key prophets?

Moses first knows about God's call when he encounters the burning bush, and is told to take off his sandals. Moses is commissioned by God to tell Pharaoh to let his people worship in the desert. Moses spends a lot of time telling the Lord he must have the wrong chap.

Isaiah is much more positive, by contrast. In Isaiah 6 we read that he had a vision of the Lord in heaven, sitting on his throne, surrounded by seraphim singing the sanctus. He is scared because he has seen the Lord, but is a man of unclean lips — so a seraph flies down and touches his lips with a live coal to purify him — ow! Then the Lord asks 'whom shall I send?' And Isaiah replies — 'here I am, send me!'

Ezekiel has a calling story too — he sees The Lord’s throne with mighty chariot wheels, surrounded by creatures with wings, and four faces, man, lion, eagle and ox. And the Lord calls him and tells him to go to the Israelites and tell them to listen.

I find it interesting that these callings are each different — burning bush, a voice in the night, a vision of heaven, a vision of God’s throne on the move in Babylon. Each occasion is miraculous. Samuel’s is much the lowest key, except that we are told, after the fourth calling that *the Lord stood before him to speak*, so Samuel receives a full theophany, a full revelation of God.

Let’s cover the background. Samuel’s mother was Hannah. She has him as a miraculous birth after barrenness, and celebrates by singing a song that is a prototype to Mary’s song, and by dedicating Samuel to the Lord’s service. We are pre-David here, so Jerusalem is not the capital, and there is no temple — that comes later. The tabernacle is at a place called Shiloh, roughly in the middle of Israel. So as a young boy Samuel goes to serve in the temple, under the mentorship of Eli, the priest. But Eli’s sons, we are told are no good, they are lawless and disrespectful to God’s law in various ways.

We are also told two things — Eli was old and his sight was failing, and secondly that the word of the Lord was rare, and there were not many visions.

A question comes to mind immediately. Why? Why was the word of the Lord rare in those days? Did God have nothing to say? Was God content? If you look back into Judges you will know that he could not be. Why was the word of the Lord so rare? Was no one listening? This reminds me of the philosophical question ‘if a tree falls in the forest and no one is there to perceive it, does it make a sound?’ — Our equivalent is that, ‘if God speaks, but no one is ready to hear him, does he, indeed speak?’

I hear this as a very bleak question. If the word of God yearns to communicate and to be known, but no one among God’s people is there to know him — what then? To what depths have we plunged?

Another thing to be born in mind here — there was no written Bible at the time of Samuel, as far as we know. Though the words of the earliest parts of the Bible date from long before this, they were almost certainly not written down, but carried in oral tradition. We have a sense of the word of God, and the knowledge of God hanging by a thread.

But this is God’s story as well as ours, and God will not disappear from the reach of human knowledge or understanding — because God is loving, and involved, and immanent, and because there are always still good, loving, involved people, whom he can call.

And God calls Samuel — and Samuel gets up and goes to Eli. This happens three times, before Eli says it must be the Lord calling — you have to respond!

An observation: Samuel gets up three times. What does that mean? It suggests he was humble. He was servant hearted, he was faithful. I think that little snapshot suggests something of his good character already.

A second observation: Hannah’s song in Chapter 1 had praised God’s upending of expectations. This now begins already:

God does not appear to Eli, the priest and man of status, but to Samuel, the boy, the servant in the temple. Later, as you know, it is not the eldest son of Jesse who is picked out as king, but David, the eighth son — still a young boy. There is a running theme of God defying expectations, and the call to Samuel is very much in keeping with that.

After the first three calls, Samuel responds to the Lord the fourth time, and God stands before him, and tells him first that he is about to do something that will make everyone’s ear’s tingle. Secondly that Eli is going to be judged for allowing his family to get away with their blasphemy. It’s a big burden for young Samuel to bear. It takes courage to be the prophet and teller of bad news as well as good. But Samuel is not lacking courage.

Happily, Eli's faithfulness to God is not an issue here — when he asks Samuel what had happened, he believes Samuel's word, trusts and respects what he says. Eli has really tried to be a good man — but his story does offer a warning — he served the Lord and neglected leading his family — and that was his failing — his *hamartia*, if you will.

Now I talked about this calling, and mentioned those of Moses, Isaiah and Ezekiel — very high profile prophetic characters in the Old Testament. I think God still calls some of us to be gifted with prophecy through the Holy Spirit. Such prophets tend to have very clear views, to see things pretty black and white. But what about other callings? How would we know if the Lord was talking to us, or guiding us? And what do you think of our modern times — would you say that God is heard rarely these days? Or do you think there are many prophets, many people giving out the word of the Lord, actually and faithfully?

Some of this is a matter of perspective, isn't it? Within the churches there are thousands upon thousands of people who are faithful to the word of the Lord — now found in book form on the shelf or bed-side table of every Christian. And there are thousands who, through being filled with the Holy Spirit, really do know what God wants and tell others. And there are those who have specific special messages, and tell them. Or God whispers things to them, that they know are true. At various points in our lives, God has seemed to tell Sarah and me certain specific concrete things about his plans for our lives — that we should marry, should move to Suffolk, what jobs he had planned for us, that I should go into ministry, and at certain times clues about when and where. We have felt a guiding hand on us. Not in big flashy ways, but a little more like God picking us up and telling us which way to go.

I cannot tell you how God will speak to you. That is between you and God. But I can tell you that in my experience it was often surprising — Sarah and I found ourselves thinking wholly differently than we had done, and then feeling very at peace with the change, and feeling that the new idea, the changer-of-our-minds had come from outside us, that is, that God had quietly suggested a new idea. One occasion I was reading the Bible — actually, the lectionary reading for a particular Sunday — and God suggested to me something through that. It helped us hold our nerve at a time of uncertainty. Another occasion I took the dog for a walk, prayed the whole way round, and came back with a change of heart on something very important in our lives.

Another time, someone in a church I was visiting prayed with me and had a word from God about my mum. A year later, he was proven right. Another occasion, while I was doing a placement from college in prison chaplaincy God spoke to me through one of the prisoners, who had woken up knowing he had a message for someone, but didn't know who. We both knew who it was when we started talking.

And this, in the end, is my conclusion: God often doesn't talk to the person you think he's going to, and not in the manner you suppose. God doesn't always go to the person in charge, like Eli, he goes to the humble, quiet servant boy who is *listening*.

God has a plan, and good ideas for most of us. He still speaks rarely — I've listed most of my moments over a lifetime — but we should expect God to speak, and we should listen. We should read his word attentively, expectant that God will show himself to us generally, shaping us with his love, his goodness, his humility. But occasionally there will be moments in which we are convinced he is speaking to us in that moment. When we pray, we should have moments in which we are so wrapped up in prayer, so absorbed, that the telephone of prayer can become two-way at last. It should, occasionally happen in a way that convinces you that God really did share something new with you.

And, very finally, if and when that happens for you and it's right to share — I'd love to know — because I might just be Eli, and you might be Samuel, and I need to hear what God has to say, as well as you.

Amen.