

LifeWay Explore the Bible Series for September 14: Serving the Lord faithfully

September 2, 2008

• *1 Samuel 3*

In order to make a point during a sermon or Bible study, I occasionally will ask the individuals in a group of Christians to raise a hand if they ever have heard God speaking to them. On almost every occasion I have performed this experiment, only a very few hands go up. Sometimes it's just one or two. And sometimes, none at all.

This is surprising, especially when you consider that for a Christian person, the default answer to that question is "yes." Indeed, the fact that a person is a Christian requires he or she has heard, in some form or fashion, God speaking to them. Jesus said: "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. ... It is written in the Prophets: 'They will all be taught by God.' Everyone who listens to the Father and learns from him comes to me" (John 6:44-45). On another occasion, Jesus would say, "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me" (John 10:27).

Perhaps what people mean when they say they never have heard God speaking to them is they have never heard an audible divine voice with their physical ears. We easily forget that God might speak to our hearts and minds in many possible ways. And speak, he does.

It is that communicative activity of God which drives the events of 1 Samuel 3. Verse 1 sets the stage for what is to follow by telling us these events took place during a period when messages from God were rare.

In one episode of a popular TV sitcom, one of the characters—a 12-or-so-year-old boy—went a couple of days without speaking a word. Finally at the supper table one evening, when asked a question by his mother, the boy just shrugged his shoulders and still said nothing. “What’s the matter,” the mom asked, “don’t you speak to your family anymore?” He blurted out, “I haven’t said anything in two days, and nobody’s noticed.”

What a sad picture: Their own son had withdrawn from them and fallen silent, but Mom and Dad were so wrapped up in their own lives they weren’t even aware of the fact.

We can’t help but wonder if the same thing might be said about the lack of God’s communication to Israel during the waning years of the period of the judges. Did they notice? Did they miss hearing God speak?

But there is a glimmer of hope in this phrase of verse 2: “The lamp of God had not yet gone out ...” Literally, this is referring to the olive oil-fueled luminary, the tending of which was one of young Samuel’s duties in the place of worship. Symbolically, many commentators see here an assurance that although revelations from God were rare during that time, they were not non-existent.

One of those rare words from God was communicated to the high priest Eli in chapter 2 through an unnamed man of God (2:27-36). His message was against the two sons of Eli, who had become utterly corrupt in their priestly office and duties. But ultimately, God’s message was against Eli himself, who had shown indulgence to his sons rather than spiritual leadership to the people of Israel. 1 Samuel 3:2 says Eli’s eyes had grown so weak he could barely see; perhaps this is a subtle gibe at the high priest, implying it was not just his physical eyes that were weak.

Now the scene shifts to young Samuel. Night had come, and the boy was lying down in his usual resting place when he was stirred by a voice calling

his name. Thinking the aged high priest was calling him, Samuel got up and reported to Eli. Eli probably thought the boy had been dreaming and sent him back to bed, but twice more the same thing happened. Verse 7 interprets the event: "Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord; The word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him."

A point might be made here that hearing God's voice and interpreting God's will for our lives is a skill which must be developed. Like Samuel, we might hear God speaking to our hearts and minds, but not recognize it is in fact God. But as we grow in our relationship to God through Jesus Christ, the words of Jesus in John 14:26 will become increasingly meaningful to us: "But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things"

Of course, the converse also is true: It can be easy to confuse what we want for ourselves with what God wants for us. We might attempt to justify any course of action by claiming it is what we feel "led of God" to do.

When I was in college, one of my fellow-students (who wasn't terribly studious) had fallen way behind in his assignments in a particular course, and so he went to the professor and said, "Doc, I've been praying about it, and I really feel led to drop your course." The professor replied, "Son, don't blame God if you are too lazy to study."

The third time the divine voice spoke to Samuel, Eli finally recognized what was taking place. Eli was a weak leader who had significant problems, but to his credit, he gave the boy wise counsel. He told Samuel to go back and do what he had been doing when he heard God speak to him the previous three times; and if he were to hear God's voice again, to respond: "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening" (3:8-9).

Samuel did as he was told, and when God called to him the fourth time, he answered as the high priest had instructed him. Those words suggested by

Eli, and spoken to God by Samuel, provide us with a tremendous example of the sort of attitudes we ought to have as we approach the subject of interpreting God's will for our lives. First of all, we ought to stand ready to listen as God speaks through any channel he desires. Second, we need to stand ready to act at God's behest. God wants to reveal his will to us, but not so that we might consider that will as one option among several; he speaks to us so we can go and act on what he says.

Samuel's initial assignment was one he probably was tempted to pass on. God's message to the boy was a confirmation of the judgment coming on Eli and his family (3:11-14). No possibilities of changing the course were offered; Eli's family had reached the point of no return.

Samuel understandably was hesitant to tell Eli—a man for whom he doubtless had filial love and respect—what God had revealed to him. But again, to Eli's credit, he received and humbly accepted the prophecy that God gave to Samuel (3:15-18).

Verse 19 states "the Lord was with Samuel as he grew up, and he let none of his words fall to the ground." Unlike Eli, Samuel served faithfully as God's spokesman to his generation.

Look carefully at the dramatic contrast between 3:1 and 3:21. What a difference. The life of Samuel marked the beginning of a period of renewed divine revelation; all God said to Samuel, Samuel said to Israel (3:21-4:1). And as we will see in the chapters to come, God indeed had a lot to say to Samuel.