

Samuel to Solomon When God Speaks

Part 4

1 Samuel 3

Sometimes God is silent.

Now the young man Samuel was ministering to the LORD under Eli. And the word of the LORD was rare in those days; there was no frequent vision. (v. 1)

We take many things for granted in life. We often do not appreciate the goodness of these things until we lose them -- good health, caring parents, freedom, friendships... The list could be extended. So long as such things are part of normal life for us, we give little thought to their importance.

It is also true that those who have never known some of these good things in their experience may not really know how good they are.

One good that is taken for granted by some, and unknown to others, is the word of God. The Old Testament prophet Amos issued a terrible threat to the people of Israel in the eighth century B.C.:

*"Behold, the days are coming," declares the Lord GOD,
"when I will send a famine on the land—
not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water,
but of hearing the words of the LORD.
They shall wander from sea to sea,
and from north to east;
they shall run to and fro, to seek the word of the LORD,
but they shall not find it." (Amos 8:11, 12)*

God will be silent, Amos warned his hearers. It will be like a terrible famine, in which starving people search desperately for food and drink but can find nothing. But it will be worse than that: there will be no word of the Lord to be heard anywhere. That will mean, as Amos said a few lines earlier, the *end* for Israel (v. 2).

It is difficult for us to sense the horror of Amos's warning because we do not readily appreciate, on the one hand, the brilliant goodness of the word of God and, on the other, our profound dependence on God's word. This may be because we have come to take the word of the Lord for granted or because we have never known its goodness.

As we return to the days of young Samuel at Shiloh, we learn that those days were somewhat like the days that Amos, a couple of centuries later, would proclaim were about to come again to Israel. These were days when "the word of the LORD was rare."

In context it is important to see that this statement is a comment on the word of the Lord that was reported at length at the end of chapter 2. That message shows clearly that in those days the Lord could, and at least on that one occasion did, speak his word. But this was a rare thing.

The reason for this famine of the word of the Lord has been presented in the previous chapter. The priests at Shiloh, in particular Eli's scurrilous sons, "did not know the LORD" and behaved with an outrageous contempt for both God and the people (1 Samuel 2:12-17). The priests, who had been appointed by God as mediators to receive his revelation, to offer the sacrifices for the sins of the people, and to represent the people before the Lord had become self-serving "worthless men" (1 Samuel 2:12). There is clearly a connection between the rarity of the word of the Lord and the failings

of the priesthood. God would not speak often to such a priesthood, and when he did speak, it would be the kind of terrible word that we heard at the end of chapter 2.

In this dark situation our attention is once again drawn to "the young man Samuel." Since a great deal was made of his name when it was given to him in chapter 1 (see 1 Samuel 1:20, 27, 28), each mention of his name should remind us of the unusual circumstances of his birth and his coming to be at Shiloh.

This is the fifth time we have heard a brief statement about Samuel and his activities at Shiloh. These statements have been five bright spots in the otherwise dark and gloomy account of the goings on at Shiloh:

And the boy ministered to the LORD in the presence of Eli the priest. (1 Samuel 2:11)

Samuel was ministering before the LORD, a boy clothed with a linen ephod. (1 Samuel 2:18)

And the young man Samuel grew in the presence of the LORD. (1 Samuel 2:21)

Now the young man Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the LORD and also with man. (1 Samuel 2:26)

Now the young man Samuel was ministering to the LORD under Eli. (1 Samuel 3:1a)

In the very setting of the degeneracy of Hophni and Phinehas and the failing competence of Eli,

Samuel progressed from being the lad who served the Lord under the direct supervision of Eli "the priest" in 1 Samuel 2:11, to taking on the priestly garment himself in 1 Samuel 2:18,

to personal growth "with the LORD" (literal translation) in 1 Samuel 2:21,

to a youth in good standing with God and the people in 1 Samuel 2:26,

to the one we will now see at Shiloh serving the Lord, still "under Eli," but with Eli no longer called "the priest" in 1 Samuel 3:1.

We now turn our attention more fully to this young man and hear about what happened one night in those dark times at Shiloh.

The Word Of The Lord Was Heard (vv. 2-10)

Things were about to change. The situation described in verse 1 will be very different by the time we reach the end of chapter 3.

A Situation Where God Was Not Known (vv. 2-7)

The night began like any other night in those days in Shiloh. Take a look at old Eli that night. Then see young Samuel. Then hear of the unusual thing that happened.

Old Eli (v. 2)

At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his own place. (v. 2)

We have already been told that Eli was "very old" (1 Samuel 2:22). His failing eyesight was, no doubt, part of the unwelcome physical deterioration that accompanies old age. However, the writer has chosen to highlight this particular aspect of Eli's decline immediately after mentioning the fact that in those days "there was no frequent *vision*." Eli's physical condition was a reflection of the spiritual

reality. He could not see the light of day, nor could he "see" the word of the Lord. His darkness was deep.

The old man was "lying down." In a moment we will see that Samuel was "lying down" too. However, Eli's "lying down" will continue through this night, whereas the young Samuel will be very active. Old Eli, lying down, is part of a picture that is being built up of a man too old to do much at all. All we have seen him do in the whole story so far is sit, speak, hear, and now lie down (1 Samuel 1:9, 14; 2:22; cf. 4:13, 18)!

More pointedly Eli was lying down "in his own place." There is nothing wrong with that, of course. After all, as we will see, it was nighttime. But "in his own place" will make quite a contrast to the place we are about to see young Samuel.

As we look at old Eli we ought to sense the growing crisis. Israel had always needed a mediator to receive God's word, to offer sacrifice for their sins, and to represent them before God (cf. Exodus 20:18-26; Deuteronomy 5:23-31). Here we see Israel's mediator as feeble and frail. What will happen when Eli is gone? Who will take over his role? Hophni and Phinehas are next in line!

Young Samuel (v. 3)

Happily our attention is not directed to those two crooks, but to the boy who has been the real interest of our story so far:

"The lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the LORD, where the ark of God was" (v. 3).

Once again the writer seems to be selecting physical details with striking significance. "The lamp of God had not yet gone out." On the one hand, this was the lamp that burned "from evening to morning" in the tabernacle (Exodus 27:20, 21; Leviticus 24:1-4). If it "had not yet gone out," it was still nighttime. On the other hand, in the darkness represented by God's silence and Eli's blindness, the news that God's lamp "had not yet gone out" suggests that God had not yet abandoned his people. There was still hope.

While old Eli was lying down "in his own place," we are shown the young Samuel lying down "in the temple of the LORD." The temple of the Lord (that is, of course, the tabernacle) represented God's dwelling among his people. This was where one would expect the word of the Lord to be given, the sacrifices to be offered, and the priest to represent Israel before the Lord. The decline of Eli and the corruption of his sons threatened these necessary expressions of Israel's relationship with God. But the lamp of God had not yet gone out: young Samuel was there, in the temple of the Lord.

To underline the symbolism of the scene: "where the ark of God was." This is the first mention of the ark in 1 Samuel. It will play a major role in the story of the next three chapters. At this point, however, the presence of the ark in the tabernacle reminds us of God's covenant commitment to Israel, and his covenant demand. The ark was a gold-plated wooden box that contained the two stone tablets of the Law with the engraved words, "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:2, 3; also see Exodus 25:10-16).

We see the young Samuel with the lamp of God still burning, the temple of the Lord still standing, and the ark of God in its place. The scene is set for the account of the strange thing that happened that night.

Items in the Ark

Exodus 25:16 (NASB)

¹⁶ "You shall **put into the ark** the **testimony [the Ten Commandments]** which I shall give you.

Exodus 16:33-34 (AMP)

³³ And Moses said to Aaron, Take a pot and put an omer of **manna** in it, and lay it up before the Lord, to be kept throughout your generations.

³⁴ As the Lord commanded Moses, Aaron laid it up before the Testimony to be kept [in the ark].

Numbers 17:10 (AMP)

¹⁰ And the Lord told Moses, Put **Aaron's rod** back before the Testimony [in the ark], to be kept as a [warning] sign for the rebels; and you shall make an end of their murmurings against Me, lest they die.

God's Unrecognized Word (vv. 4-7)

What was rare in those days, happened that night: "Then the LORD called Samuel..." (v. 4a).

It is clear that on this occasion the word of the Lord came, to Samuel at least, in an audible voice. Whether or not it would have been audible to anyone else present, we do not know. Eli's sleeping place may have been some distance away, and anyway his hearing was probably not much better than his eyesight.

If God called Samuel in an audible voice, Samuel's reaction is not at all surprising: "... and he said,

'Here I am!' and ran to Eli and said, 'Here I am, for you called me'" (vv. 4b, 5a).

Who else would have been calling the boy? But do notice his energetic responsiveness. It was immediate and fast. He ran to Eli.

Eli, of course, did not move:

"But he said, 'I did not call; lie down again.' So he went and lay down" (v. 5b).

Obedient, but no doubt a little perplexed, Samuel did as he was told.

And the LORD called again,

"Samuel!" and Samuel arose and went to Eli and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call, my son; lie down again." (v. 6)

Eli's affectionate way of speaking to Samuel as "my son" is poignant. His actual sons had defied him and brought God's condemnation.

Neither Samuel nor Eli yet understood what was happening. The narrator has told us, twice now, that it was the Lord who was calling Samuel. He now gives us an explanation for Samuel's responses to the strange voice:

Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD.... (v. 7a)

This is a strange thing to say. After all, have we not been told that Samuel was ministering to the Lord, that he was growing with the Lord, that he enjoyed the favor of the Lord? What does it mean, "Samuel did not yet know the LORD"?

The strangest thing about these words is that they are almost exactly the same as the critical words about Hophni and Phinehas in 1 Samuel 2:12: "They did not know the LORD." In their case that was part of the description of them as "worthless men." The description of Samuel repeats the words of 2:12, with one significant difference: "Samuel did not yet know the LORD."

The ignorance he shared with Hophni and Phinehas had this difference. They did not know the Lord because they had rejected knowledge of God by their contempt for God's Law. Samuel did not yet know the Lord because "... the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him" (v. 7b).

That is, this experience of being addressed by the Lord was entirely new to him.

On the one hand, in the case of Hophni and Phinehas, we see that it is not possible to know God at the same time as defying him. You cannot know God and live in disobedience to God.

On the other hand, in the case of Samuel we see that it is only possible to know God when God acts to make himself known.

We have this remarkable situation at Shiloh: God was speaking, but the word of the Lord was not recognized for what it was. For different reasons God was not known at Shiloh.

A Situation in Which God Was Heard (vv. 8-10)

That situation was about to change.

Eli's Realization (v. 8)

And the LORD called Samuel again the third time. And he arose and went to Eli and said, "Here I am, for you called me." Then Eli perceived that the LORD was calling the young man. (v. 8)

Old Eli realized that something was happening that had not happened at Shiloh for a very long time. His sight had grown dim, but he was not yet completely blind.

Eli's Instruction (v. 9)

So old Eli told young Samuel what to do:

Therefore Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie down, and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant hears.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place. (v. 9)

We wait, as no doubt both Samuel and Eli waited. Would it happen a fourth time? What would be the consequences if Samuel followed Eli's simple but awesome instructions?

Samuel's Hearing (v. 10)

We are not kept waiting long:

"And the LORD came and stood, calling as at other times, 'Samuel! Samuel!' And Samuel said, 'Speak, for your servant hears'" (v. 10).

This time there seems to be more than the voice. The Lord "came and stood." Without any more detail we should refrain from speculating further about the manner of God's presence. Suffice it to say that God was objectively and really present. This was no mere dream on Samuel's part.

In this carefully told story, we should perhaps notice that Samuel did not quite manage to say exactly what Eli had told him to. The name of God ("LORD") did not come to his lips. His timidity, in the circumstances, is more than understandable.

It has taken half the chapter for the word of the Lord to be heard. But at last there was a servant at Shiloh who was hearing.

The Word Of The Lord That Was Heard (vv. 11-18)

When God speaks, it is not some kind of mystical experience, in which it is the experience of hearing that matters. When God speaks, what matters is what God says.

The Word of Judgment (vv. 11-14)

On this occasion what God said was terrible.

Ears Will Tingle (v. 11)

Then the LORD said to Samuel, "Behold, I am about to do a thing in Israel at which the two ears of everyone who hears it will tingle." (v. 11)

This vivid turn of phrase occurs a couple of times later in the Old Testament. Do you know the experience of being so terrified that you cannot speak, and your lips quiver? Here a similar sensation is described, in the ears of someone hearing terrible news. God was about to do something "in Israel" (therefore an event of national significance) that would have that effect on the ears of everyone who heard it!

God Will Be True (vv. 12, 13)

"On that day I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. And I declare to him that I am about to punish his house forever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them." (vv. 12, 13)

The simple but terrible news was that God would do what he had said he would do. On one of the rare occasions that the word of the Lord had been spoken in those days, it was by the man of God who came to Eli and delivered the message we heard in 1 Samuel 2:27-36. The word of the Lord to Samuel was now simply that it was about to happen.

The word "punish" in verse 13 is often translated "judge." Over the previous couple of hundred years God had raised up "judges" who had delivered Israel from enemies and called Israel to obedient living (see Judges 2:16-19). In this sense they had brought justice to Israel. However, with Israel's leadership in deep crisis, God himself was about to "judge" the house of Eli "forever" (v. 14).

14 "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."

The judgment of God against human wickedness is always a terrible thing to contemplate. It is hardly possible for us, embroiled as we are in the sinfulness of humanity, to see clearly the rightness of God's ways. It is very important for us to take care here and humbly listen to the word of God, not passing judgment on it, but allowing it to illumine our minds.

By the standards that we might apply to ourselves, Eli was not an excessively wicked man. His various failures,

such as his mistaking Hannah's prayer for drunken mumbling,

his inability to curb his sons,

and his slowness in recognizing that God was speaking to Samuel,

are all readily attributed to his advancing years. We can think of plenty of excuses for Eli, for he was (we might feel) no worse than any of us. And there are things about Eli that we admire.

The accusation in verse 13 may therefore sound harsh to us: "he did not restrain" his sons. Well, we might say, it was not for want of trying!

The trouble with all this is that Eli is not being judged by *us*. It is the Lord who said that his sons were blaspheming and that he did not do what he should have done. It is not for us then to sit in judgment over the Lord. He is the God of knowledge, by whom deeds are weighed (1 Samuel 2:3). There is a certain arrogant absurdity in responding to this passage as though we know more about Eli's innocence (from the few pages that we have!)—and have a keener sense of justice—than the Lord does!

No Sacrifice Left (v. 14)

The worst of the rotten things that the sons of Eli did was to treat with contempt the very provision God had made for the forgiveness of sins (see 1 Samuel 2:17, 29). This had frightful consequences:

"Therefore I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be atoned for by sacrifice or offering forever" (v. 14).

Do you understand the horror of those words? If the gracious provision God has made for the forgiveness of sins is spurned, scorned, disdained, despised, there is nothing left but the fearful prospect of judgment.

This now makes sense of the disturbing words of 1 Samuel 2:25: "But they [Eli's sons] would not listen to the voice of their father, for it was the will of the LORD to put them to death." The sons of Eli had passed a point of no return. They had sinned with such high-handedness that they were beyond the pale.

The New Testament recognizes the same reality.

If you trample the Son of God underfoot, if you treat with contempt the death of Jesus for your sins, what hope do you think there is for you? There is no sacrifice left to atone for your sins if you have discarded the death of Jesus (cf. Hebrews 10:26-31).

The Response of Fear and Submission (vv. 15-18)

That is the word of the Lord that young Samuel heard that night.

Samuel's Fear (v. 15)

It is no wonder that we now read:

"Samuel lay until morning; then he opened the doors of the house of the LORD. And Samuel was afraid to tell the vision to Eli" (v. 15).

I doubt that he slept for whatever remained of that night. When he rose and opened the doors of the temple, we can imagine the morning light streaming in. But he was afraid. The word of the Lord that had come to him that night was a fearful message. He had no desire to share it with Eli, of all people.

Samuel's Submission to Eli (vv. 16-18a)

However, as Samuel might have expected, Eli was not likely to leave the matter there:

But Eli called Samuel and said, "Samuel, my son." And he said, "Here I am." And Eli said, "What was it that he told you? Do not hide it from me. May God do so to you and more also if you hide anything from me of all that he told you." So Samuel told him everything and hid nothing from him. (vv. 16-18a)

Eli seemed to recognize the difficulty. His words to Samuel were both kind ("Samuel, my son") and very firm. In the strongest possible terms he insisted that Samuel tell him all that the Lord had said.

Eli could have been in little doubt of the terrible nature of the message. We do not know what time interval may have elapsed since the man of God had come to him in 1 Samuel 2:27, but it was not the kind of visit that could be forgotten. This word from God now, not given to Eli himself, but to the young man in his care, could only be fearful news.

Samuel's own fears gave way to submission to the old man Eli. Samuel told him all. The difficulty of that conversation we can only imagine, for the narrator gives us no more than the matter-of-fact report in verse 18a.

Eli's Submission to the Lord (v. 18b)

Eli's response was rather more than matter-of-fact: "It is the LORD. Let him do what seems good to him" (v. 18b).

"It is the LORD." In two words (in the Hebrew) Eli implies what Hannah had stated: "There is none holy like the LORD" (2:2). This may have been Eli's finest moment, as he acknowledged and accepted the rightness of God's judgment. His words were not unlike the one who, many years later, after God's judgment had finally fallen on Jerusalem, said,

"The LORD is in the right, for I have rebelled against his word" (Lamentations 1:18).

A Prophet In Israel: God Is No Longer Silent (vv. 19-21)

Things could not be the same again in Shiloh, nor in fact in Israel. Samuel now knew the Lord, for the word of the Lord had now been revealed to him. The consequences are summed up in the last three verses of the chapter.

Samuel and His Words (v. 19)

And Samuel grew, and the LORD was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. (v. 19)

Whose words—Samuel's or the Lord's? Both, because, as we are about to hear, Samuel was now a prophet. He would speak God's words. And none of those words would fail.

This is the sixth and last of the brief summaries of Samuel's development at Shiloh. It would appear that the story of Samuel has reached its climax.

Israel and Samuel (v. 20)

That impression is strengthened as we hear of Israel's response to Samuel:

"And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba knew that Samuel was established as a prophet of the LORD" (v. 20).

Samuel was "established" (the word suggests trustworthiness, reliability) as the Lord's prophet because his words did not fail.

God No Longer Silent (v. 21)

And so the situation described in verse 1 of this chapter came to an end:

"And the LORD appeared again at Shiloh, for the LORD revealed himself to Samuel at Shiloh by the word of the LORD" (v. 21).

The God who had cared about childless Hannah cared about Israel in her time of leadership crisis. The word of the Lord would now come to Israel by the prophet he had called. God was no longer silent.

Let us make two observations as we conclude our consideration of 1 Samuel 3.

The first is about the developments we are seeing in the Israel of Samuel's day.

The second is about what is happening in our day.

Remember the severe crisis in Israel, which I have been describing as a crisis of leadership. In response to that crisis, what did God do? Did he raise up a man with what we would call leadership gifts? Did he set up a new organizational structure for the nation?

No. He sent *his word*, and he provided for his word to come to all Israel. Samuel held no recognized office. God made him a prophet, whose role was to speak God's words. God's response to Israel's leadership crisis was the provision of *his word*.

As you listen to the closing lines of chapter 3, don't you get the clear impression that it was *good* that God's word was heard again in Israel? It was *good* that Samuel was established as a prophet among them. There were terrible things yet to come, as we will see. But God was no longer silent, and that meant that it was possible for them to be Israel, God's people, again—to hear the word of the Lord, to believe him, to obey him. Read a Psalm like Psalm 19 or Psalm 119, and you will hear how good it was for God's people to have the word of the Lord.

What does all this have to do with what is happening today?

I cannot think of a better place to see it than in the well-known words of Hebrews 1:

"Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son..." (vv. 1, 2).

As then, so now God leads his people by his word. God's word to us is the word he has spoken by his Son, Jesus Christ. It is the word you hear when you hear the truth of Jesus Christ. God is not silent. We can be his people—we can hear his word, believe him, obey him.

And that is good—so very, very good!