

Listening to the Lord

1 Samuel 3:1-12,19-21

God gives marvelous and manifold blessings to those who come to Him. He is a protector and provider, a comforter and counselor. But we cannot come to Christ any way we might please. We must come to Him His way. And only His way.

...without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him. Hebrews 11:6 (NKJV)

But faith precludes proof. We need no faith for that which we can clearly see.

...faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. Hebrews 11:1 (NKJV)

If He chose, God could appear to us in all His glory. He could provide irrefutable proof of the reality of His existence. But then there would be no need for faith. And God demands we come to Him by faith.

So our Lord stands behind a veil. He does not shout. And neither His Holy Spirit nor His hosts of angels are visible to human eyes.

God does not merely demand that believe His Word, trust that He loves us and, through His Son's sacrifice, will receive us as His children. He also insists that we seek Him diligently and desperately. Our desire to know God cannot be halfhearted or haphazard. It must be absolute.

You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart. Jeremiah 29:13

When Samuel was still a skinny, twelve year old boy, Israel had become accustomed to impotence and inactivity from their God. In the long generations since Joshua died, only two prophets appeared. But, like like meteors flashing across a desert sky, they soon faded.

Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord before Eli. And word from the Lord was rare in those days, visions were infrequent. Verse 1

It was a day much like our own: a day when the voice of God is seldom heard. But God's silence had nothing to do with Him. Then and now, our Lord attempts to speak to men.

God does speak—now one way, now another—though man may not perceive it. Job 33:14 (NIV)

The truth is that God wants to have a personal encounter with each of us. He wants to speak words of comfort, counsel and correction to us.

When we are confused, He would give us clear, concise directions. When we are discouraged and depressed, He would give us hope. But most of us do not hear what our Savior would say to us.

At Shiloh, sleeping tents lined the back and sides of the tabernacle sanctuary. Men who had spent their lives studying the Scriptures and serving the Lord slept there. But only a boy named Samuel heard the voice of God.

Lean on Him

Each evening when the sun slipped down behind the western ridge, a lamp with seven flames was lit. And it flickered on until the gray light of dawn bloomed in the east.

Eli was a very old man. He had put on weight over the years. And now his eyes were so dim, the world around him was all clouds and haze. So the old priest had the boy Samuel sleep in a little tent beside his at the back of the temple sanctuary.

It happened at that time as Eli was lying down in his place (now his eyesight had begun to grow dim and he could not see well), and 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, Verses 2-3

All that separated the tents where both Eli and Samuel slept from the tabernacle was the back tent flap of the sanctuary itself. And on the other side of that wall of goat skin was the holy of holies where the ark of the covenant with its gold cover sat behind a thick veil.

Asleep in his tent, Samuel heard a voice calling his name. But that was nothing new. Old Eli often needed help and called out to him.

...the Lord called Samuel; and he said, "Here I am." Then he ran to Eli and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call, lie down again." So he went and lay down. Verses 4-5

Three times it happened. Only then did the old priest realize God Himself was calling the boy.

Then Eli discerned that the Lord was calling the boy. And Eli said to Samuel, "Go lie down, and it shall be if He calls you, that you shall say, 'Speak, Lord, for Your servant is listening.'" Verses 8-9

It was a humbling thing for Eli. The God of his fathers had chosen to communicate with His people. But the Lord did not speak to the old man who had spent his life serving Him. Instead, He chose a little boy.

But Eli had grown to love Samuel. So the old priest gave the boy some very specific instructions. When the voice called his name again, Samuel was to answer.

Speak, Lord, for Your servant is listening. Verse 9

Those words could not to be empty, either. They had to be more than mere protocol. Each word was vitally important. And each word had to be a real description of himself.

Samuel was to address the voice that echoed out from the inner sanctuary of the temple as *Lord*. Not merely Lord in name, either,

After all, God does not speak to those whose hearts are far from Him. He speaks only to those who honestly and genuinely belong to Him.

God did not speak to Eli's sons, Hophni and Phinehas. Their hearts were filled with passion and pride, with greed and lust. They trusted in no one but themselves. So they slept on through the night.

Even Eli's heart was a mongrel mix of self and spirituality. While he believed and served God, he refused to discipline his wayward sons. And he had grown fat and affluent from their graft.

Life had not been easy for little Samuel. It was a hard and bitter thing to be separated from his mother and father. He had been sent away to spend his life serving God. But He did not merely serve God. He also trusted in the God with all his heart.

And if God is to speak to those of us who call ourselves Christians, we must trust in Him with our whole heart, just as Samuel did. He does not speak to those whose faith is frail and feeble.

Samuel knew the scriptures. He had spent most of his childhood listening to them. He knew all the old stories of Abraham and Isaac, of Jacob and Joseph, of Moses and Joshua. But he had never had a personal encounter with God.

Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, nor had the word of the Lord yet been revealed to him. Verse 7

Merely knowing the truth of God's Word is not enough for anyone. Paul knew the Scriptures by heart. But his life was not changed until he had a personal encounter with Jesus. And our lives will also remain unchanged until we have a personal experience with God.

But if God is to speak to us, we must faithfully walk according to the light our Lord has already allowed to shine upon us. We must trust His Word that His Son carried all our sins to the cross. We must believe Christ conquered death. And we must lay our lives in His holy hands.

Otherwise, we too will sleep on through life like the priests who slumbered undisturbed through that night at Shiloh.

Worse yet, we will never experience the power and presence of the living God. We will live as if mediocrity and impotence are all there is.

Live for Him

It seems like a small thing. But it was not. Three times, the boy Samuel heard a voice. Three times, he thought it was the old priest calling for His help. And three times, the boy vaulted out of bed and ran to help Eli. He did so without complaint, too. He did not pretend not to hear the cry. Neither did he sulk and shake his head in frustration.

It was not an easy thing to be repeatedly roused from sleep. Neither was it simple and without stress to run through the flickering lamplight to perform some small errand for the blind priest.

But that is precisely what this little boy did. His mother had sent him to Shiloh to serve God. And that is just what Samuel did.

But his tasks were anything but vital and important. Each morning he opened the gates to allow worshipers into the tabernacle compound. Each day, he ran errands. And both day and night, he helped old Eli.

Samuel had no inkling that his life of service to God would ever entail any more than those simple tasks. Nevertheless, he carried them out with all his heart. He was faithful to serve God in whatever small and insignificant ways he could.

He was a lot like a young man named Joseph. Years ago, Joseph and his wife traveled with a tent evangelist. Joseph was a gifted musician and singer. But all he was allowed to do were menial tasks.

He helped set up the big tent. He arranged seats, wiping dust and dirt from them so the people who attended the meetings would have a clean place to sit. He emptied portable toilets and ran errands.

And throughout the sweltering summers, Joseph and his wife slept in a pup tent. Never once were they invited into the air conditioned mobile home where the evangelist slept.

Yet, the young man performed his menial tasks faithfully. That is part of the reason why God called Joseph to serve Him in greater ways.

His master said to him, "Well done, good and faithful slave. You were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things;" Matthew 25:21

Christ's call comes to Christians who have demonstrated a pattern of faithfulness. Our Savior speaks to those who willingly and joyfully serve Him in whatever small ways He allows.

But if we are so filled with so ambition and pride that small services for Jesus Christ are beneath us, we dare not suppose that our Lord will call out to us and put us in a larger place. We are unworthy of His call.

In the days that followed Samuel's first encounter with his God, the boy's life was wonderfully changed.

Thus Samuel grew and the Lord was with him and let none of his words fail. All Israel from Dan even to Beersheba knew that Samuel was confirmed as a prophet of the Lord. And the Lord appeared again at Shiloh, because the Lord revealed Himself to Samuel at Shiloh by the word of the Lord. Verses 19-21

It was not long before all of Israel honored Samuel as God's servant and spokesman. But this boy's promotion to prophet did not really begin with that midnight call from God.

It began long before, in the drudgery of long days of service and sacrifice. And that is where our own personal encounter with God must also begin.

If we are not faithful over few things, we will never be given greater responsibilities and respect. We must start out by living for God.

Listen to Him

Eli looked at Samuel and smiled. Then he told the boy exactly how to respond the next time he heard

his name called out from the holy of holies. So Samuel walked back to his tent and laid down in the darkness. And for a long moments, he heard nothing at all. But all the time he was listening past the snoring of the other priests.

We must also listen carefully for God to speak to us. After all, it is exceedingly rare when God will speak to us in an audible voice. He said so Himself.

If there is a prophet among you, I, the Lord, shall make Myself known to him in a vision. I shall speak with him in a dream. Numbers 12:6

In later years, God spoke to Samuel many times. But He seldom did so in the profound and overpowering way He did that first night. Most of the time, God spoke to Samuel as He often speaks to us: through His Holy Word.

...the Lord revealed Himself to Samuel at Shiloh by the word of the Lord. Verse 21

More than a century ago, George Müller was known a man of faith and prayer. And he once said that if you would hear God's voice of counsel or encouragement, do not talk to Him in prayer. Sit quietly and listen for the still small voice of His Spirit.

And if you still hear nothing, take some time to read a passage from your Bible. Most often, that is where God would speak to us. But we must listen prayerfully and expect Him to speak to us.

God also speaks to us through sermons. But all too often we do not realize it really is our Lord who is speaking to us.

A long time ago, my wife and I were new members at small country church. The preacher was a thin young man without any of the credentials one might expect in a powerful preacher.

He suffered so profoundly with dislexia that simply reading the scriptures out loud was an ordeal. His delivery was not fiery and forceful, either. He simply stood up and explained God's Word in a soft voice.

Nevertheless, a few weeks after we started attending Sunday services, I refused to return. The messages the preacher delivered were like darts. And I was convinced he was following me around and talking about the sins and shortcomings he saw in my life.

I was wrong, of course. The man hardly knew me. The great God of Heaven Himself was speaking to me through that country preacher. But I was not listening to hear what my Lord was saying.

And quite often, we do not listen for God's Spirit to speak to our hearts when we sit in church, either. But if we listen, He will speak to us.

There are also times when God will speak in a still small voice deep inside us. He will do so by simply planting thoughts in our minds.

But if we are not careful to listen, expecting God to speak to us, we will be like Samuel. We will mistake God's voice for another. We will explain away His Spirit's voice as stray thoughts or our own imagination. And we will miss all the blessings and bounty He has for us.

God did speak to Samuel again. While the boy laid on his bed in the darkness, the voice came once more.

Then the Lord came and stood and called as at other times, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for Your servant is listening." Verse 10

Our God's knowledge is complete and comprehensive. And He knows when we really are listening for Him to speak to us.

So this time, God called out the boy's name twice. That is how He spoke to Moses from the burning bush. But that is not all the Lord did that night when a twelve year old boy listened for Him.

God also came and stood as a visible presence in Samuel's little tent. And in that there is an important lesson. If we will trust God completely, serve Him faithfully, and listen prayerfully for Him to speak, God will reveal Himself to us as never before.

The night God spoke to Samuel was not the climax of the boy's life. It was only the beginning. In days to come God spoke to Samuel again and again. He spoke to help him grow closer and closer to the Lord he loved. The Creator spoke to His prophet to deepen his faith and prepare him to serve and stand for Him, too.

God's precious Spirit would also speak to you and me in the same ways. His love for each of us is both personal and profound. And He aches to pour His blessings into our lives. But we must listen for His

voice.

That night at Shiloh, God spoke to Samuel about how He was about to carry out judgements against Eli and his sons for their sin. But the boy did not know what to do with the message.

So he laid on his bed, sleepless until dawn. But the next day, old Eli demanded to know what God had told Samuel. And the boy told him.

Samuel did not know that God expected him to act upon the messages his Master communicated to Him. But that is precisely what God always expects of us.

When our Lord speaks to us, He expects us to believe what He says. But is not all. He also expects us to do what He says. When He speaks to us to encourage our weak faith and calm our fears, He would have us lift our heads, strengthen our knees, and leave our despair behind. And when He speaks to counsel or confront us, He wants us to do as He has told us.

God spoke in the night and called Samuel by name. But that is not surprising. Our Lord never speaks to groups of people. He calls people one by one: personally and individually.

This side of Heaven, hearing that call is the greatest honor anyone can receive. It is a door thrown open to light and life, to joy and jubilation. But we must respond as Samuel did.

Speak, for Your servant is listening. Verse 10