

SINNERS & SAINTS

Samuel

I Samuel 3:1-21

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We continue our Sinners & Saints sermon series today by exploring the life of a man named Samuel. Samuel is a fascinating figure in Israel's history. He was a transitional leader—a combination judge/prophet/priest—who led the nation of Israel between the time of the judges and Israel's first king, Saul. He was also the one who anointed David king of Israel and helped usher Israel into what, in many ways, was the nation's most successful era. It's impossible to grasp the importance of Samuel's story without understanding what was happening in the nation of Israel just prior to and during Samuel's long life, and it's difficult to adequately tell Samuel's story without at least touching on the stories of his mother, Hannah, and his predecessor as priest, Eli.

Throughout this series, we've been emphasizing that the people God used in the Bible to accomplish his purposes weren't perfect. They had warts and flaws, and they messed up and sinned just like you and I do, and yet God in his grace chose to work through them to carry out his plans. Another common misconception we tend to have about the people God uses is that they're always powerful and influential people. We discount the truth of the Apostle Paul's words I closed last week's message with. After being told by Jesus that God's power is made perfect in weakness, not in strength, Paul said, "Therefore I will boast in my weakness, because when I am weak, then I am strong." In today's story, we'll see that in this instance, God used a woman who was unable to have children and a young boy to tune into his heart, and they were instrumental in bringing about spiritual renewal to God's people, the nation of Israel.

As we walk through the sermon today, I want to encourage you to keep two truths about God in mind. First, **God is never completely silent.** We may go through seasons where we don't hear God's voice or know his will for our lives, but He's never totally silent. There's a lot of truth in the statement, "If you're feeling distant from God, ask yourself who moved." God's nature is to reach out to us in the hope of drawing us to Himself. We're the ones who tend to drift from Him, forget about Him or ignore Him for stretches of time. During the time leading up to Samuel

being called by God to lead Israel, we read a harsh critique of God's people. 1 Samuel 3:1 tells us, "In those days the word of the Lord was rare; there were not many visions." Things were quiet in Israel, and God's wasn't often being heard from, but He was still at work and He wasn't silent. Secondly, as we listen to Samuel's story, I want us to keep in mind that **God often communicates through unlikely people**. Israel, as we'll see, was in a bad place, but God wasn't silent, and when He chose to act and to speak, He did so through a woman who was unable to conceive a child and later through her young son.

Samuel arrived on the scene during a dark period in Israel's history. God's people had been delivered from Pharaoh's control in Egypt. They had been led by Moses through the wilderness and by Joshua into the Promised Land, but not too long after they reached the Promised Land, things went sideways. They were caught in a vicious cycle of following God and experiencing his promised blessing, growing prideful as they tasted success and forgetting that God, not they, were responsible for all the good things they experienced. Then they'd wander away from God, inevitably experiencing hardship and difficulty. In their distress, they'd turn back to God and cry out to Him, and eventually he'd deliver them, and then the whole cycle would repeat itself.

A quick sidenote: It's easy for us to read the Old Testament and think, "Why were God's people so thick-headed? Why couldn't they understand that the path to success and a vibrant life lay in humbly following God, living their lives for Him, and forsaking other gods and goddesses and distractions?" It's easy for us to be critical and to wonder that about the Israelites, but if we look in the mirror, we'll see that the Israelites' cycle of embracing pride when things are good and calling out to God in desperation when times are hard is actually human nature—and every one of us is prone to that as well.

I mentioned earlier that we can't look at Samuel's story apart from the persistent prayer of his mother, Hannah. Hannah's husband, Elkanah, had two wives. His wife Peninnah bore him children, but he loved Hannah more. In last week's sermon about Tamar, I shared that the primary purpose of women in the culture of that day was to bear children and carry on their husband's family line. As difficult as it is for anyone to be unable to have children, it was even

more devastating in that day, because bearing children was the main purpose and source of identity for a woman.

Elkanah and Hannah were devout followers of God, and every year they went to Shiloh to worship God and make sacrifices to Him. I invite you to follow along as I read 1 Samuel 1:9–20.

Once when they had finished eating and drinking in Shiloh, Hannah stood up. Now Eli the priest was sitting on his chair by the doorpost of the LORD's house. ¹⁰In her deep anguish Hannah prayed to the LORD, weeping bitterly. ¹¹And she made a vow, saying, "LORD Almighty, if you will only look on your servant's misery and remember me, and not forget your servant but give her a son, then I will give him to the LORD for all the days of his life, and no razor will ever be used on his head."

¹²As she kept on praying to the LORD, Eli observed her mouth. ¹³Hannah was praying in her heart, and her lips were moving but her voice was not heard. Eli thought she was drunk ¹⁴and said to her, "How long are you going to stay drunk? Put away your wine."

¹⁵"Not so, my lord," Hannah replied, "I am a woman who is deeply troubled. I have not been drinking wine or beer; I was pouring out my soul to the LORD. ¹⁶Do not take your servant for a wicked woman; I have been praying here out of my great anguish and grief."

¹⁷Eli answered, "Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him."

¹⁸She said, "May your servant find favor in your eyes." Then she went her way and ate something, and her face was no longer downcast.

¹⁹Early the next morning they arose and worshiped before the LORD and then went back to their home at Ramah. Elkanah made love to his wife Hannah, and the LORD remembered her. ²⁰So in the course of time Hannah became pregnant and gave birth to a son. She named him Samuel, saying, "Because I asked the LORD for him."

God heard and answered Hannah's prayer by granting her a son, who she named Samuel, because she asked the Lord for him and God heard her. The name Samuel sounds like

the Hebrew for “Heard by God.” The theme of being heard by God and of hearing his voice is one that reoccurs throughout this story. True to her word, when Samuel was approximately three years old (it was their practice to nurse children much longer back then), Hannah took him to the priest in Shiloh. She dedicated Samuel to the Lord, and he lived at the House of the Lord. We’re told that once a year, Hannah would visit Samuel when she and her husband went up to make the sacrifice, and when she went, she’d take him a new robe that she’d made for him. In response to Hannah’s obedience in dedicating Samuel to Him, God blessed her with three sons and two daughters.

There’s another detail from Hannah’s story I’d like to point out, because it’s indicative of the state of things spiritually in Israel at that time. In verses 12–16, we’re told that when Eli the priest saw Hannah praying, he noted that her lips were moving but no words were coming out. He jumped to the conclusion that Hannah must be drunk, and he rebuked her. Hannah was quick to defend herself, and Eli saw that he was mistaken. I think it’s safe to draw some conclusions from this. It must not have been uncommon for people to come to the House of the Lord drunk if this was the quick assumption Eli the priest made. Also, Eli’s misreading of Hannah and his inability to know that she was praying doesn’t shine a favorable light on his own level of spiritual discernment.

1 Samuel 2 paints an even more dire picture of the spiritual state of things in Israel and in Eli’s household. In verse 1 we read, “Eli’s sons were scoundrels; they had no regard for the Lord.” The ensuing verses tell us how they wrongly stole meat from the people bringing sacrifices so they could eat the best portions of the meat, and they slept with women who served at the tent of meeting. In spite of their father’s warnings, Hophni and Phinehas continued to dishonor God by using their position as priests to satisfy their own sinful desires.

Meanwhile in 1 Samuel 2:28 we read, “And the boy Samuel continued to grow in stature and in favor with the Lord and with people.” That brings us to the story that Samuel is probably best known for. It’s found in 1 Samuel 3. As I read this account, I encourage you to make note of two things:

- God’s word was rare, but he spoke to a child or young teen

- It took Eli the priest, who should have recognized what was happening, three times to realize it was God who was speaking to Samuel. Verse 2 notes that Eli's eyesight had deteriorated so much that he could barely see. Bible scholars believe that beyond Eli's eyesight failing in his old age, this statement signifies the old priest's inability to hear God or discern how He was working.

Follow along as I read verses 1-10.

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

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

Samuel answered, "Here I am." ⁵ 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.

⁶ 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."

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

⁸ 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. ⁹ 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.

¹⁰ The LORD came and stood there, calling as at the other times, "Samuel! Samuel!" Then Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

The word God spoke to Samuel that day was that Eli's house was going to be judged by God because of Eli's failure to restrain his sons, but more important than the specifics of the message that day was that this marked a pattern of God speaking to and through Samuel, which would carry on throughout his life. In verses 19–21 of chapter 3 and verse 1 of 1 Samuel 4 we read,

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

And Samuel's word came to all Israel. – 1 Samuel 3:19–4:1

So, at the start of Samuel's life, we're told, "In those days the word of the Lord was rare; there were not many visions," and after Samuel first heard from the Lord, we read, "The Lord continued to appear at Shiloh, and there he revealed himself to Samuel through his word. And Samuel's word came to all Israel." This dramatic change in the spiritual climate of Israel came about through a barren woman who persistently prayed for a child and her son, who as a young boy, heard and obeyed God's voice.

I'm fascinated by Samuel's story, and I hope you are too, but beyond the interesting story line, there are important insights we can gain and apply to our lives. The first insight I want to highlight is something important for me and any of us who find ourselves in positions of spiritual leadership or influence. God often speaks to and through spiritual leaders, but none of us should take hearing from God for granted, thinking that it's our right. **God calls those with influence and in positions of leadership to continue seeking Him in humility. And He wants us to be open to the fact that God isn't limited in who He speaks to.** Just as God worked through Hannah and spoke to her young son, He isn't limited in who He speaks to and who is able to discern Him.

The second truth I'd like us to focus on is the other side of the coin that I mentioned. **We should never discount ourselves from being able to hear from God or discern his voice**

because we're young, or new in our faith, or don't have much influence, or fill in the blank.

God can and will speak to whomever He chooses.

Finally, Samuel's story speaks words of encouragement to those of us who are walking through a season where God seems silent or distant or absent. **When you don't sense God's nearness, continue to pursue Him.** Hannah was barren and convinced she'd been forgotten or perhaps was being punished by God, but she kept on praying and crying out to God, and God heard and answered her prayer. Probably the best advice we're given about prayer is found in Matthew chapter 7—words from Jesus' sermon on the mount.

⁷ "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. ⁸ For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.

⁹ "Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? ¹⁰ Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? ¹¹ If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him! – Matthew 7:7-11

A prominent thread that runs throughout Samuel's story is the concept of hearing—being heard by God and hearing Him when He speaks to us. My hope for each of us is that we'll be people who have an ongoing awareness that our Heavenly Father hears us and is aware of what's happening in our lives, and that we're also attuned to his voice, hearing Him speak to us and being able to discern his will.