

If you've been following the Explore Bible Notes over the last couple of months, you'll have been following historical events in Israel as they are told in the first book of Samuel. I don't know about you, but I've really enjoyed the studies and reading the stories surrounding the prophet Samuel. We've seen people's down to earth everyday experiences of God. It's been a good read.

You know, there are **millions** of people out there that think that the stories in the Bible are a good read; but to **them**, that's all they are – good readable stories. I don't know what percentage of children will know anything of the Bible, but many will know the story of Noah and his ark, of David and Goliath, of Daniel in the lion's den, of Jonah and the big fish that ate him. They're all good stories. We do love a good story, don't we?

But the sad thing is that they know nothing of the **God** of Noah, David, Daniel and Jonah. We only **know** these stories because God caused them to be written down and preserved over thousands of years. So to ignore the God **behind** these wonderful stories, is to miss the **whole point** of their existence. We must make sure that we're not just satisfied with a good story; we must look at why these stories are recorded, because *“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness,”* (2 Tim. 3:18).

With that in mind let's read 1 Samuel, chapter 3. [Page 274 in the blue church Bibles].

Why are the 2 books of Samuel **in** the Bible, and what makes them important? Where do they fit into the story of God's people?

Well, the events they record happen almost 1000 years before Jesus was born. And they come at a time when men did what they felt to be right – they did what they wanted, in other words, with little if any regard for God's rule. We read the phrase 'Israel did evil in the eyes of the Lord' many times in the book of Judges.

This first book of Samuel tells of the choosing of Israel's first king, Saul – the people of Israel wanted an earthly king, not a heavenly King. Up until this time Israel was led by people called judges – Samuel was to be the last judge, a man who guided God's people according to God's word.

Samuel was an answer to prayer. His mother Hannah was unable to have children, we read in chapter 1. In verse 11 of chapter 1 we see her weeping and praying for a son. She promised to give him for the Lord's service, if God heard her prayer. God **did** hear her prayer, Samuel was born, his name it says in the footnote sounds like the Hebrew for 'heard of God'. And so Hannah keeps her promise, in verse 28 she says, "*For his whole life he shall be given over to the Lord.*" And the fulfilment of this is in chapter 2, verse 11, "*the boy ministered before the Lord under Eli the priest.*"

The boy Samuel grew up in the presence of the Lord, but a quick aside – what about Hannah, who had prayed so desperately for a son, only to then give him up? This must have been a wrench for her. Well, we read in Chapter 2:21, "*The Lord was gracious to Hannah; she gave birth to three sons and two daughters.*" The Lord replaced the son given to his service with five more children.

You know, we can't outgive God. He calls us to live our lives in his service, giving as **he** gave - sacrificially. **He** gave his only Son – what have we to give that compares with that? He is gracious, he will give us all we need. We read in Ephesians that God has blessed us with **every** spiritual blessing. Do you think you're giving too much to the Lord – too much time, too much energy? Think again. Look at what he has given for us. We can never outgive God.

Chapter 2:26 says that "*the boy Samuel continued to grow in stature and in favour with the Lord and with men.*"

Notice that in the references I have read so far, it says "*the boy Samuel*". This is clearly a contrast to the men of Israel at that time, and with the priest Eli under whose care he was.

Eli and his family has been rejected by God in chapter 2. Eli's sons were wicked, but Eli failed to restrain them – he was a very good priest, but a poor parent. He did not discipline or control his sons. Because of this, his family was rejected by God, and he is told of impending punishment in the second half of chapter 2. Another aside - let's remember that God gives us family – he **calls** us to that responsibility, we should not neglect the well-being of our family – even if they neglect him. I believe the Bible says that we should not neglect our families, not even in our service of him.

So here we have the background to the story we read in chapter 3. Samuel with Eli only too pleased to act as his mentor.

There are three sections in this chapter: the manifestation of God to Samuel (verses 1 – 10), the message for Eli (verses 11 – 18), and the ministry of Samuel (verses 19 – 21). **The manifestation of God, the message for Eli, and the ministry of Samuel.** But the message for us in this passage is about **hearing, learning and doing.** Hearing, learning and doing.

Let's look at the first section – the manifestation of God to Samuel, God making himself known to Samuel.

We read in verse 1 that *“in those days the word of the Lord was rare;”* God had spoken very clearly in the past to people like Moses and Joshua as they led his people, but now the word of God was rare – but it was his people who were at fault. It wasn't a matter of God not **wanting** to speak to his people, but rather that his people were not willing to listen. Samuel's night-time experience was unusual and unexpected – perhaps this is why it took Eli three goes to work out that it was **God** speaking to the boy.

We find Eli lying down in his usual place, and Samuel lying in the temple of the Lord. This tells us two things: firstly that Samuel was fully integrated into Eli's family, and secondly that the laws referring to access to the Most Holy Places in the temple were not being fully observed. The regulations of Leviticus chapter 16 were not being implemented fully. Another reason why God could not be heard by that generation.

I've already said that Samuel was a willing servant – *“Here I am,”* he said. He ministered in the presence of the Lord, although verse 7 here tells us, *“Samuel did not yet know the Lord.”* He didn't know God in a personal way, but he was willing to serve. So as soon as he hears a call in verse 4, he runs immediately to Eli, thinking it's the old man who has called. The text doesn't imply that it's an unusual event – perhaps the old and increasingly blind Eli called for his help frequently in the night. And even when Eli says, *“My son, I did not call; go back and lie down,”* even when it turns out that he is not needed, the next time Samuel hears a call, he jumps up again and runs to Eli without complaint.

If only children nowadays were that willing to come running when we older ones call!

When Samuel disturbs Eli's sleep for the third time in verse 9, the old man realises that the voice was the Lord's. Some old men would have been put out that God had spoken to a mere boy, and not him, a faithful priest, but no, 3

Eli is more gracious than that. He may be uncertain about his standing before the Lord, but he is only too willing to be used by God. God **could** have spoken to Samuel without Eli's involvement, but God sees fit to **use** Eli to draw Samuel into a closer relationship with God and to enable him to understand God's word. Eli **still** has a role to play, and this should serve as an encouragement to those who maybe feel that their usefulness to the Lord has passed. While we are here in this life, we will **always** be useful for the Lord, especially in encouraging the young ones to understand God better. There is something really wonderful about the older and wiser generation getting alongside the younger ones to encourage them in their faith.

This is the power of God - so far in this story he has used a barren woman, an aging priest and now an inexperienced boy – God can use anyone, at any time, in any place for the purposes of his kingdom. But God will use people who **listen** to him. And that is what Eli tells Samuel to do the next time the Lord calls. When he hears the voice of God, he is to say, "*Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.*"

Samuel lay down again. Now he was waiting. Now he was **expecting** to hear the voice. I think he would have been very excited at the thought, but perhaps not really understanding the enormity of what was about to happen.

This time we read that "*The Lord came and stood there.*" (verse 10) This time he could see as well as hear. But notice that when the Lord calls his name, Samuel says, "*Speak, for your servant is listening.*" He doesn't address the visitor as Lord. Perhaps this shows his uncertainty, his fledgling faith, he still has doubts as to what this is really all about. God still speaks to him, despite his uncertainty, despite his doubts. God doesn't demand that our knowledge is full, he doesn't require our faith to be perfect. We can hear God's voice even when we feel our faith is weak.

The manifestation of God to Samuel. At first Samuel doesn't recognise the voice of God, because he doesn't know God. **We** have to make sure that we don't miss or mistake his voice. He speaks to us through his word, through other Christians, through our own consciences, through our experiences. We have to make sure that we are **listening**. That is our responsibility. Like Samuel after Eli had told him that it was the Lord calling him, we need to be **waiting** for God to speak, **expecting** him to speak, **excited** that God wants to speak to us. Come apart from the busyness of everyday life, be quiet, hear his voice, 4

don't run the risk of missing out on blessing because we are not expecting God to speak. Listen, be ready to hear. What is God saying to you?

The second part of this story tells us of [the message for Eli](#). OK, we're ready to listen, we're ready to hear what God has to say to us. Eli is ready and wanting to hear what God had to say to Samuel. Sometimes God's word is not always easy to hear or to speak. In verses 11 – 14, God speaks to Samuel. It isn't a very pleasant message. Remember he is only a boy – we're not told exactly how old at this stage – but the fact that he is a boy is mentioned numerous times. How will this message have seemed to a boy, when it is talking about the downfall of the family of the man who has welcomed him so warmly and has guided and encouraged him all along the way in his service of God?

The message is so shocking that it will “*make the ears of everyone who hears of it tingle*” (verse 11). People will be struck with terror perhaps when they see the outworking of this message – Eli's sons will be killed (4:11), Eli himself will break his neck and die (4:18) and his family will be dispersed. What a shocking message. This is the message entrusted to the boy Samuel.

It's obvious he hasn't heard what we read of in chapter 2 – that Eli's family has been rejected by God – and when he gets up the next morning, he goes about his normal duties. He was afraid, he wondered how he was going to deliver this message to the old man who had been so gracious to him. But he learns quickly with Eli's help, that messages from God **have** to be delivered.

So Eli **insists** on hearing God's message, “*What was it he said to you?*” (v. 17) He made Samuel tell him all that God had said to him. Even now, when Eli knows it is bad news for him and his family, he is helping Samuel to see what his life-long role was going to be – to listen to God's word to his people and to deliver the message, whether good or bad. He can't just give the good bits and ignore the bad bits. People have to hear the whole story – God is a God of love, but also a God of righteousness and justice. There is eternal life for those that are his, but eternal Godlessness for those who choose **not** to be his.

Samuel knows that the message he delivers to Eli is not pleasant for speaker or hearer. But notice how Eli accepts it without question: “*He is the Lord; let him do what is good in his eyes,*” he says in verse 18. Eli's acceptance of God's judgement is seen here as positive – God is the Lord, he is to be obeyed, he does what is right, we must do what he commands.

This is a lesson which Samuel learns at the hands of Eli. It was Eli that taught him to listen to God when he spoke. It was Eli who taught him to deliver the full message from God. And the boy Samuel was only too willing to listen and learn.

So what about us? We may give ourselves all the right opportunities to listen to God and his word, we may be in all the right places at all the right times, we may come to meetings, we may read God's word, we may listen intently. But are we learning? Or are we like those Hebrews Christians being written to in chapter 5 of that letter – the writer wants to explain much more about Jesus and his salvation – but he writes, “... *it is hard to explain, because you are so slow to learn. In fact, though by this time you should be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again.*”

Those Christians weren't ready to move on to spiritual solids because they were slow to digest the spiritual milk. What about us? Are we continually learning? Or are we just going through the motions – the intentions are good, we're listening – but are we learning more and more about “*the full riches of complete understanding, in order to know Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge,*” as we read in Colossians.

David – another boy who was used by God – he slayed Goliath through his faith and trust in God – he prays in Psalm 27, “*Teach me your way, O Lord;*” This is the attitude of heart that we all need. You can't learn without listening – I keep telling my pupils that at school - but you **can** listen without learning. We must make sure that that doesn't happen with us – Satan is pleased when the seed does not germinate, when God's word does not reach our hearts. Let's make sure that doesn't happen. Let's be listeners, let's be learners.

Samuel listened to God; he learnt what God and Eli were teaching him about the service of God. Where does this lead? Knowing leads to growing. Samuel says later to King Saul, “*To obey is better than sacrifice,*” (15:22). He listened, he learnt, he obeyed. For Samuel it wasn't just receptive – he didn't just listen to God, he didn't just learn about God – he acted according to God's word.

Doing. There is a contrast between Samuel and Eli – Eli avoided wrong actions, but in failing to stop his sons from sinning against God, he failed to do the **right** thing. It's not enough to not do the **wrong** things, we have to do the **right** things.

Samuel learnt to obey God's word fully, and this was why he became a strong leader – because he learnt the importance of listening, learning and doing.

William Graham Scroggie – a pastor at the beginning of last century – said, *“Divine knowledge leaves no man stationary.”* And the 17th century preacher Thomas Fuller said, *“Action is the proper fruit of knowledge.”*

We must move on from listening, through learning to **doing**.

We find this in the third section of our passage, verses 19 – 21. [The ministry of Samuel.](#) Let's read these verses again.

This night-time calling of Samuel was a turning point. It marked the beginning of Samuel's close and constant relationship with God. God honoured him, he was with Samuel and he let none of his words fall to the ground. God had a work for Samuel to do. He continued to appear to Samuel, we read in verse 21, *“he revealed himself to Samuel through his word. And Samuel's word came to all Israel.”* Samuel has shown himself to be a willing listener, a learner, and a doer – he receives from God, and then goes out and delivers God's message to the people, leading them in the wisdom of God.

Notice the contrast between the first and last verses of our passage this morning: verse 1 *“... in those days the word of God was rare ...”*; verse 21, *“... The Lord continued to appear at Shiloh, there he revealed himself to Samuel through his word.”* Samuel was recognised by the people of Israel as a prophet of God – there was no doubt among the people. Now the word of the Lord was no longer rare, but was freely available throughout the country – from Dan to Beersheba (places used to describe the boundaries of the promised land of God). From north to south, everyone in Israel heard God's word. All this through the boy Samuel who has known the Lord with him as he grew up.

So much was achieved through his ministry – **he** was to anoint Israel's first king, Saul. **He** was to anoint David king over Israel, the ancestor of the Lord Jesus. What a part Samuel had to play in the outworking of God's plan for mankind. He was willing to be used as God's servant to his people – *“Here I am”* he said. He listened to God's word, he learnt from it and he responded to it. Eli failed to act to correct the members of his family, but Samuel was extremely active in acting to correct the people of Israel. Samuel's word, God's word, came to all Israel.

“Action is the proper fruit of knowledge.”

James says in his letter, *“Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like.”* (Jas 1:22-4) We must be willing listeners, willing learners, but also willing doers.

Peter said to Jesus, *“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.”* (John 6:68). Why should we **not** listen to Jesus? Why should we **not** learn of God and salvation from Jesus? Why should we **not** do what God says to achieve that salvation? He has the words of eternal life – surely we want to count ourselves among those who have received the words of eternal life. Surely that’s where we want to be, don’t we?

God is speaking today, in these times of trouble we are living in. We must listen to what God has to say, we must apply what we hear to our lives, we must act upon the things we learn as we hear his voice. He’s speaking to you today, respond to what he is saying to you. *“Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”*

Let’s look at Samuel and be determined to listen to God, to learn from God, and to work for God.