

The Boy Samuel Hears God

In a time when God's word was rare, a boy serving in the tabernacle hears a voice calling his name. God speaks, and Samuel begins his prophetic ministry.

1 Samuel 3:1-21

CHARACTERS: Samuel, Eli, Hophni, Phinehas

THEMES: Calling, Obedience, Listening to God, Prophecy, Judgment

THE BOY SAMUEL ministered before the Lord under Eli's supervision. In those days, the word of the Lord was rare; there were not many visions. Spiritual darkness had fallen over Israel. Eli's own sons, Hophni and Phinehas, served as priests but were wicked men who had no regard for the Lord. They treated God's offerings with contempt and committed immorality with women at the tabernacle entrance. Eli, old and nearly blind, had failed to restrain them.

One night, Eli was lying in his usual place. The lamp of God had not yet gone out—it was still before dawn. Samuel was lying down in the temple near the ark of God. Then the Lord called Samuel.

Samuel answered, 'Here I am.' 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 Samuel went and lay down.

Again the Lord called, 'Samuel!' And Samuel got up and went to Eli. 'Here I am; you called me.'

'My son,' Eli said, 'I did not call; go back and lie down.'

Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord: the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. The Lord called Samuel a third time, and Samuel got up and went to Eli. 'Here I am; you called me.'

Then Eli realized that the Lord was calling the boy. This was remarkable—God was bypassing the established priesthood, speaking instead to a child. Eli instructed Samuel: 'Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."'

So Samuel went and lay down. The Lord came and stood there, calling as at the other times, 'Samuel! Samuel!'

This time Samuel answered, 'Speak, for your servant is listening.'

Then the Lord gave Samuel a message—and it was not easy. 'I am about to do something in Israel that will make the ears of everyone who hears about it tingle. At that time I will carry out against Eli everything I spoke against his family—from beginning to end. For I told him that I would judge his family forever because of the sin he knew about; his sons blasphemed God, and he failed to restrain them. Therefore I swore to the house of Eli, "The guilt of Eli's house will never be atoned for by sacrifice or offering."

Samuel lay down until morning, afraid to tell Eli the vision. But Eli called him. 'Samuel, my son, what was it he said to you? Do not hide it from me. May God deal with you severely if you hide from me anything he told you.'

So Samuel told him everything, hiding nothing. Eli's response showed both resignation and faith: 'He is the Lord; let him do what is good in his eyes.'

The Lord was with Samuel as he grew up, and he let none of Samuel's words fall to the ground. All Israel from Dan to Beersheba recognized that Samuel was attested as a prophet of the Lord. The Lord continued to appear at Shiloh, revealing himself to Samuel through his word.

What began with a boy listening in the darkness became a voice that would guide Israel for generations. Samuel learned early what many never learn: the importance of listening, of being still enough to hear God's voice, of having the courage to speak God's word even when it was difficult.

Soon Eli's sons fell in battle, the ark was captured, and Eli himself died upon hearing the news. The judgment Samuel had prophesied came to pass. But Samuel remained, faithful and true—the one who had learned to say, 'Speak, for your servant is listening.'

In a time when prophetic vision was rare, God had raised up a prophet. And it all began with a boy in the darkness, willing to listen.

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