

Hearing God / I Samuel 3:1-10

Hannah struggled with infertility. More than anything else in the world she wanted a baby—a son. Her husband loved her and tried his very best to comfort her. He would often ask, “Don’t I mean more to you than ten sons?” She appreciated his concern and was grateful for his love, but no matter how hard she tried, nothing could chase away the hollowness in her heart.

She would go to God’s temple and pour out her heart in prayer. She prayed so fervently that on at least one occasion she was thought to be drunk and was just about kicked out of the house of God. Yet no matter how often she prayed, no matter how fervently, she heard nothing from God except silence.

Then, at last, God spoke. Not in words, but in pregnancy. She bore a son and named him Samuel (after whom two Bible books are named). Samuel was her prayers answered, her dreams come true. She had everything she had hoped for and wanted in life. Perhaps that is why what she did is so extraordinary. When he was just a toddler she gave him back to God. She actually took him to the temple and left him there in the care of Eli, seeing him only on annual visits.

In I Samuel 3:1-10 we have a page from Samuel’s biography:

In those days the word of the Lord was rare; there were not many visions.

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

Samuel answered, “Here I am.” 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.

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.”

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 and said, “Here I am; you called me.”

Then Eli realized that the Lord was calling the boy. 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.

The Lord came and stood there, calling as at the other times, “Samuel! Samuel!”

Then Samuel said, “Speak, for your servant is listening.”

Have you ever heard God speak out loud to you? Some of us might say “yes”. Probably most would say “no”. But all would admit that it must be an extraordinary thing to hear a voice call you by name and realize that it is God himself speaking directly and specifically to you.

I can’t say that I have ever heard God speak audibly to me as he did to Samuel. I think I would like to hear God speak my name, although I confess that the thought of so hearing God frightens me for I wonder what else he might say. For it seems to me that we are often

very concerned that God hear us when we pray, but we are not so often concerned that we hear God. And God does speak, you know. God speaks for us to hear.

In Exodus 33:11 we are told, “The Lord would speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks with his friend.” And, in the New Testament God spoke aloud at the baptism of Jesus. Matthew 3:16-17 says, “As soon as Jesus . . . went up out the water . . . heaven was opened, and . . . a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.’” And there are other stories in the Bible of God directly speaking to people. Each such story fascinates me and dazzles me.

Just as your voice and mine can be uniquely identified, so can the voice of God be uniquely identified.

Suppose you arrive home after being gone for awhile and there is a light blinking to indicate that you have a phone message. You listen to your message and the voice says, “Hi. This is George Bush calling. Sorry to miss you. I’ll call you back later.” What would you think? First of all, you’d probably think it was a joke. But what if it’s not? Should you hang around and wait for him to call back? Should you call him back? What’s his number? Is it okay to call “collect”? Maybe you’d rather not talk to him.

More important by a million times to the millionth power would be a call from God. There is nothing else like a direct spoken work from God! But does God so speak today? Or were his words just for Moses on the mountain or just for Jesus in the Jordan River? Surely God may say whatever he chooses whenever he wants to anyone he pleases. People have told me that they have experienced God directly and audibly speaking to them about matters quite routine. But, is it God speaking to them or do they have overactive imaginations?

I can’t always easily judge whether someone has heard a word from God or whether it is imagination. I suppose it is ultimately for each individual to personally decide. But I do know that in the Bible the voice of God was rarely heard. Sometimes there were hundreds of years of silence between his words. And, when God did speak it was of matters very important. And, the words God spoke were seldom if ever for personal benefit. They were spoken for reasons that reached far beyond any one person. His words were for a large group of people and sometimes for the whole sweep of humanity.

It seems to be rare and extraordinary for mortals to directly hear God speak. But there are other ways to hear God. Much more often in the Bible God spoke through spokespersons, most notably prophets. They were men and women who communicated God’s word to others. Prophets included Miriam, Anna, Isaiah, Jeremiah and many others. In different ways they received messages from God or knew the mind of God which they then told to other people on God’s behalf. Often it was a message that had to do with the future. That’s why we so often think of prophecy as predictive.

There was a simple test in the Old Testament to determine if a prophet really spoke for God or was faking it. If the prophet’s predictions came true, listen. If the predictions did not come true, stone the

prophet to death and don’t listen. The rule kept a lot of people from faking!

Are there such prophets today? Certainly many people claim to be prophets speaking for God. Some claim to have entirely new messages, information from God that he has never told anyone else before. Others say they have figured out the Bible for the first time in more than 2,000 years. Many get lots of attention, especially when they talk about the end of the world and related topics.

How do we test them? “If the world ends, they were right. If the world doesn’t end, stone them to death?” There is a better way. Test what they say against the Bible.

One new technology is the voice print. Some say it is as individual as a fingerprint. You can take a tape of my voice now and compare it to a tape from a decade ago and determine if I am the same guy. Let me suggest that just as your voice and mine can be uniquely identified, so can the voice of God be uniquely identified.

When someone claims to be speaking for God today, we can compare it to the voice print of God in the Bible. God has left a clear and unique record. If what a modern prophet says looks and sounds like the print of God’s voice in the Bible, it’s ok. If not, it’s a fake.

God has often spoken to humans through special means such as visions, dreams, a star over Bethlehem and even handwriting on a wall. The familiar Christmas story has Joseph about to divorce his wife for immorality when God speaks to him in a vision and tells him what to do and he totally changes his plans. The Bible is full of those kinds of visions and dreams and special means of God talking to humans.

Recently someone told me of an individual who literally cut out of the Bible every reference there was to visions or dreams or messages directly from God or words from angels. There wasn’t much left! The Bible reports lots of such supernatural communication.

So, how does this work for us today? Let me explain briefly. We need to understand that visions and dreams are more typical in other cultures. In our culture we are more prone to sense the direction and communication of God through circumstances. That is an important part of how we interpret what to do within our culture. Either way, or in some other way,

God has and still does communicate with people.

The greater question is not whether God can communicate through special means but how to tell if the message is from God or from sleeping on an uncomfortable mattress. The answer again is to check and compare with the Bible. Does the message match the voice print, the fingerprint, the “message print” of God in the Bible?

Through speech, through spokespersons, through special means but, best of all, through the Savior—the Bible is very clear that God’s primary way of speaking to humankind is through Jesus Christ the Savior. Let me invite you again to a few places in the Bible. In Hebrews 1:1-3 we find stunning words that put this whole matter of God speaking into quite a clear perspective:

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.

John 1:14 tells us, “*The Word became flesh and made its dwelling among us.*” And in Mark 9:7, on the Mount of Transfiguration, God said, “*This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!*”

After Jesus came there isn’t so much said about prophets, voices, visions, dreams and such. It’s not that they stopped but they were comparatively anti-climactic. I suppose you might compare it to having a flashlight with fresh batteries that shows us the way to go on a very dark night. A flashlight on a dark night when you want to know where you are going is an invaluable tool. When dawn comes and the sun rises, the flashlight still works but it is definitely not as necessary. In the same way, once Jesus came in all his brightness and brilliance, dreams and visions didn’t seem like much anymore.

We need to understand that Jesus is God. To see him, hear him, be with him and touch him is to hear, see, be with and touch God himself. But, wait a second. That worked for those people back then, but that was almost 2000 years ago. What about for us today? I can’t see him. I can’t touch him. I don’t hear him talking out loud. Does that then mean that we go

back to the old way of doing it? Are we stuck going back to the pre-Jesus days of occasional voices from heaven, prophets, prophetesses, visions, dreams and circumstances in order to hear God speak to us? No! We still may hear Jesus through the Scriptures and through the Spirit.

The Bible was written for us so that we may hear Jesus Christ today. In John 20:31 we read, “*But these things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ . . . and that by believing you may have life in his name.*” The Bible is God’s written word to us. So, if we want to meet Jesus, if we want to hear God’s word, the Bible is the place to go. That’s why reading, knowing and understanding the Bible is so all-important.

Some may say, “I prefer the real thing.” It reminds me of the mid-1960s when the United States stopped printing Silver Certificates. Our dollar bills up until then said that the piece of paper could be redeemed for actual silver. Some people wouldn’t accept or use the new fangled Federal Reserve Notes. They wanted real money . . . except, this was real money! Then there are people who don’t like checks. Their paper has to be green. Now money is a record on a computer disc somewhere. You can move it from bank to bank and pay bills with it and never have a greenback or a check. It’s electronic money. But, it’s still money and it still works.

Sure, I’d rather have Jesus face to face. But I accept God’s written check (the Bible) as worth full value. Through it I meet Jesus and through it I hear God. We hear the Savior now through the Scriptures

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and through the Spirit.

Jesus promised in John 15 and 16 that when he left earth and returned to heaven he would send his Holy Spirit to actually live inside every Christian. That happened at Pentecost in Acts 2 and is explained in I Corinthians 6:19. So, we have the best deal yet. From God talking to or through a few people . . . to God showing himself in Jesus . . . to God living inside every Christian, we have God in us.

How does that work? There is no good way for me to explain how the Spirit lives in us and communicates with us. I will give you a comparison to hint at the relationship, but I know the analogy is flawed from the start.

Computers have modems that can connect them to each other for communication purposes. You can't tell from the outside what communication is going on inside, but it is there. There is a connection and communication that is hard to see.

Well, the Spirit in us is better connected than a computer modem. More than hard to see, he's impossible to see. The Holy Spirit of God communicates with our spirits. He's tapped into our thoughts and our souls. There is a direct link.

Now let me try to explain something even harder to understand. The Scriptures are objective from the outside and the Spirit is subjective from the inside. Both are equally from God, and they supernaturally work together. The Spirit enables us to understand the Bible and the Bible helps us to hear the Spirit. It's hard to explain, but . . . Wow! It is a fantastic supernatural communication system from God to us!

Okay, put it all together. God speaks for us to hear . . . through speech, spokespersons, special means, the Savior, the Scriptures and through the Spirit. There is no doubt about God speaking! And we then listen, understanding that we must be open to letting God set the terms.

Those who want to hear God must remember that God is sovereign. God decides the terms, not us. Sometimes we want to choose. We want to tell God when to speak, how to speak and what to speak. But, that is never our choice to make.

Sometimes he chooses to be silent. Amos 8:11 informs us, “*The days are coming, declares the Sovereign Lord, when I will send a famine through the land—not a famine of food or a thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the words of the Lord.*”

Sometimes God chooses to surprise us with his speech. That is certainly what happened with 12-year-old Samuel and with a teenaged virgin named Mary. They weren't expecting to hear from God at all. Yet God spoke loud and clear to each of them.

The point is that we must keep our ears open to God without telling God what to do. If he chooses the usual ways of communication through Scripture and Spirit, let us listen. If he chooses surprising ways through visions, dreams or circumstances, let us listen then, too. If he chooses the rarest of communication through audible voice, let us listen. In every case, let God set the terms!

There were a number of Wooddalers watching a Vikings game in our den when one guest who was recording the game at home mentioned, “Oh, it's not

on Channel 4?” If we don't have the right channel programmed in, we won't get the program we wanted. Turn the knob on the radio to the wrong frequency and we won't hear our program. And, in order to hear God, we must stay tuned to his channels!

Practically, that means reading the Bible and being filled or controlled by the Holy Spirit. Read the Bible every day. Pray daily, confessing your sins and turning the rule of your life over to the Holy Spirit. Don't be like those who never open their Bibles or submit their lives to God and then wonder why they never hear God. Tune him in if you want to hear what he has to say.

One more thing must be explained to those who want to experience God through hearing. God always ties hearing to belief. Jesus said in John 5:24, “. . . *whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. . . .*”

If I shout, “FIRE! FIRE!” there is more than the sound of words involved in hearing. You must also believe! If you really hear and believe, you will do something about it.

God speaks. No doubt about that! And what he says makes the difference between life and death, heaven and hell and much, much more. Hearing is more than sounds and syllables or words on a page. Hearing includes believing and believing means doing something about it.

There is so much more to hearing God . . . and our time is long gone. To those who desire to experience God I simply encourage you to listen. And when you do talk, say the words of Samuel: “*Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.*”

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