



## LISTENING TO GOD

Pastor Al Detter I Samuel 3:1-21

9:30 & 11:00am Grace Church November 26, 2006

### Introduction:

1. A few weeks ago, we started a new series called "One-liners in I Samuel". Two weeks ago, the one-liner was I Samuel 1: 27, "The Lord has given me my petition which I asked of him." When you have a situation you can't change and you pour out your heart to God and He answers your prayer, that's a great event!
2. Last week the one-liner was I Samuel 7:12, "Thus far the Lord has helped us". In that sermon I encouraged you to set up an Ebenezer, that is, to designate something in your life that can serve as a reminder of when God helped when you were powerless to handle the situation.
3. I talked about how my wife Marie has designated a piece or two of jewelry as an Ebenezer. After the service, a couple came up and the wife said, "I gave my husband a one-liner following your sermon—"Buy me some jewelry!"
4. Today's one-liner is I Samuel 3:9, "Speak, Lord, for Your servant is listening." Before we look at this story, I want to tell you a little more about Samuel. Chapter 1 tells us about the circumstances surrounding his birth and how he was dedicated to the Lord and given to Eli the priest at age 3 for the service of the Lord for the rest of his life.
5. Chapter 2 tells us a little about Samuel's physical, spiritual, and social development in the midst of a spiritually decadent priesthood.
6. In chapter 3, we see Samuel's call and commissioning by the Lord and how Samuel ascended to national prominence in Israel as a prophet.
7. The story we're about to look at today is one of the first Bible stories I ever learned. I was about 4 years old. I can still remember the room in which I learned this story.
8. If you are parents or grandparents, I can't stress enough the importance of telling your children the stories of the Bible and showing them pictures of the stories early in their lives. The seed that's planted in those early years can last a lifetime. Those early Bible stories before I could read have helped to shape my life.
9. Here's today's story:

### The Story:

Vs. 1—It says, "The boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord before Eli." Most commentators think that Samuel was about 12 years old and that he was an apprentice to Eli, learning the priesthood.

This verse brings up an important point—children can grow spiritually and serve the Lord. It's a mistake to think that spiritual growth and serving the Lord is only an older teen or adult thing. This is the 4th time in just over a chapter that we're told that Samuel was ministering and growing before the Lord (2:18; 21; 26; 3:1). I'm grateful that Pastor Larry is finding ways for the Bridge Kids to grow and serve the Lord. You as parents need to be about the same thing at home.

Leith Anderson is pastor of a large church in the Minneapolis area. I heard him speak at a seminar a couple years ago. He made the point that research shows that if you concentrate on kids in grades 5-7, they are much more likely to go into fulltime ministry than trying to reach kids in the high school years. These are kids Samuel's age. Reaching kids when they're young is so important!

Vss. 2-3—Early one morning, God came to Samuel. Eli the priest and Samuel were still in their beds. It was just before dawn because the lampstand had not yet gone out. They put just enough oil in the lamp each night for one night.

Eli and the priests would sleep in the Tabernacle at Shiloh. Samuel was asleep near the Ark of the Covenant. The ark resided in the Holy of Holies where the High Priest would visit once a year. Next to the Holy of Holies was the Holy Place which housed sacred furniture like the Altar of Incense, the Table of Showbread, and the Golden Lampstand. Near the Holy Place was a series of small rooms where the priests and servants would sleep. Samuel was asleep in one of those rooms.

Vss. 4-5—That night the Lord called Samuel. Samuel thought Eli had called him so Samuel ran to Eli's room and said, "Here I am, you called me." But Eli said, "I didn't call you. Go back to bed."

Vs. 6—The exact same thing happened a second time.

Vs. 7—We're told that Samuel did not yet know the Lord and the word of the Lord had never been revealed to him before. Yet in chapter 2, we're told that Samuel had a relationship with the Lord. What does this verse mean? Verse 7 means that Samuel had received no direct and personal revelation from God up to this point. God is now entering into a new and deeper relationship with Samuel.

Vss. 8-9—God called to Samuel a 3rd time. Once again, Samuel ran to Eli. But this time Eli understood that it was the Lord calling to Samuel. So Eli told Samuel to go back to bed and if God called to him again, Samuel was to say, "Speak, Lord, for Your servant is listening."

Vs. 10—God called to Samuel a 4th time, but this time, in a vision. Samuel said, "Speak, for Your servant is listening."

Vss. 11-14—I think Samuel was excited to hear from God but his heart sank when he heard God's words. It was a tough message for the first message young Samuel ever received from God. In verse 11, God tells Samuel that what He's about to do will make Israel's "ears tingle". This phrase was used only in the Old Testament for God's impending judgment.

In verse 12, God tells Samuel that He's about to carry out severe judgment against Eli and his family (cf. I Sam. 2:30-36). In verse 13, God is about to judge Eli's house forever because Eli's sons, Hophni and Phinehas, had corrupted the priesthood. They didn't treat the sacrifices as holy but for gain for themselves (I Sam. 2:13-17) and they had sex with women at the doorways of the Tabernacle (I Sam. 2:22). Eli knew what was happening and he neither stopped nor rebuked his sons.

We hear of corruption among priests and pastors today, things like servants of the Lord embezzling money and being involved in illicit sex. This problem goes back 3000 years. God is telling Samuel that two things really rankle Him—pastors and priests who sin like this and leaders who know about it but look the other way.

In verse 14, God says His mind is made up and nothing can change it. Wow! That's the message that came to young Samuel! By the way, you can find out how God judged Eli's house in chapter 4.

Vs. 15—Samuel didn't run to Eli this time. He laid back down in his bed because he was scared to death to tell Eli. I'm sure he didn't sleep.

Vss. 16-17—In the morning Eli called for Samuel and said, “So what did the Lord say to you?” Almost blind Eli could sense that Samuel was afraid to tell him, so Eli said, “Don’t hide anything from me that God said to you. If it’s something bad, may God bring that upon you if you don’t tell me everything that God spoke to you!” Talk about pressure!

Vs. 18—Samuel was an amazing kid of character. He told Eli everything. The prophecy was not new to Eli. God told Eli this in chapter 2. But this time, Eli knew that his judgment was confirmed and certain to come. Eli humbly accepted what Samuel had said and put Samuel at ease.

Vss. 19-21—These verses tell us that Samuel continued to grow in the Lord. And when Samuel spoke a word of prophecy during those years, not one word failed, which was the acid test of a prophet of God (Deut. 18:21-22).

All Israel recognized that Samuel was a true prophet of the Lord, the one God called to declare His word. With this revelation of God to Samuel, Israel entered a new era. For the next several hundred years, God would speak to Israel through His prophets.

## **The Application:**

Well, that’s the story of God speaking to a young and listening Samuel. The one-liner in this story is, “Speak, Lord, for Your servant is listening.” As I think about what Samuel said here, I wonder—“Are we listening to God?” From this great story about Samuel, we need to learn 5 important lessons for listening to God.

### **Lesson #1—To hear God, we need a servant’s spirit (vss. 1, 9, 10).**

When Samuel responded to the Lord, he said, “Your servant is listening.” In the New Testament, we learn that all of us who know Christ are servants of God. But in our day, that’s a very strange concept. We don’t have masters and servants. We live in a culture of independence and autonomy. We’re people who rule ourselves. We don’t want to be servants with someone telling us what to do.

But the Bible makes it clear that when we come into a relationship with God, we have to give up self rule. We need to let God be the Master and Boss of our lives. We must surrender to His will and commands. Samuel recognized that he was a servant of the Most High God. His life was not his own. The same thing is true for us as servants of God. The purpose of our lives is to serve God. It’s not about serving our own desires and chasing our own fulfillment and happiness.

If like Samuel, we see ourselves as servants of God, we’ll be in a position to hear God. But if we’re serving ourselves, we’re not going to hear God’s voice. It’s as simple as that.

So Samuel teaches us a very important lesson. The place to begin listening to God is as a servant to his Master.

### **Lesson #2—To hear God, we need a discerning ear (vss. 4-8).**

Three times God called to Samuel but Samuel didn’t realize it was God calling to him. He thought Eli was calling to him. The 3rd time, verse 8 says, “Eli discerned that the Lord was calling the boy.” Up to this point, neither Samuel nor Eli had any idea that God was addressing Samuel. Once they figured that out, Samuel was prepared to listen in a different way for the voice of God.

It’s often difficult to discern God’s voice. There are many voices trying to get our attention in the world. Think about all the messages that come our way in a given day—family, friends, phone, radio, TV, email, work—just for starters. I can assure you that there’s another voice trying to get through—God’s voice. How are we going to hear His voice?

Let me give you two features of a discerning ear that can hear the voice of God.

**1. Expectancy**—Samuel was not expecting to hear the voice of God. Eli brought him to a level of expectancy. He told Samuel to be listening for God’s voice.

Each day we need to live with some kind of expectancy that God wants to speak to us. If we begin to listen for His voice, we'll be much more likely to hear God's voice when He speaks. If we're not expecting Him to speak, we'll probably not hear God's voice. Which leads me to the second feature of a discerning ear.

**2. Differentiation**—This is the ability to tell the voice of God from all the other voices. Samuel wasn't at first able to tell the voice of God from Eli's voice. Knowing God's voice from other voices is a skill that needs to be learned.

The way we begin to tell the voice of God from other voices is knowing how God is likely to speak. We need to know what kind of voice to be listening for. So let me give you some venues in which you can expect to hear God's voice.

**1) The Word of God.** This is the major way God speaks to us today. He speaks through His written Word. That's why it's so important to get into the Bible on a daily basis—to hear His voice.

**2) Godly friends.** I Peter 4:10 says that we are stewards of the manifold grace of God. God uses others to speak forth His grace to us. We need to be listening to God's voice through grace and truth-giving people that are connected with Him.

**3) Circumstances.** God opens and closes doors through the circumstances of life. Things happen that move us in directions that are definitely God speaking. We must watch our circumstances very closely and listen for God's voice in them.

**4) Our inner spirit.** Paul tells in I Corinthians 2:11-13 that the Spirit of God speaks to our inner spirit and teaches us spiritual things. There are times we get strong inclinations and urges about spiritual realities and actions to take. These are often the voice of God and we need to pay attention to them.

The point I'm trying to make is—God's voice is aimed at every one of us. But we need a discerning ear. Without a discerning ear, we'll miss His voice or mistake it for something else.

### **Lesson #3—To hear God, we need a conducive environment (vss. 3, 5, 6, 9).**

Being in a place that's conducive to hearing God's voice is so important! Most places drown or crowd out the voice of God. We're told no less than 4 times that Samuel was in his bed when God spoke to him. It was a quiet place that was very favorable for him to hear God speaking.

You don't need to be in bed to hear the voice of God although there are a number of places in the Bible that say your bed can be a very spiritually conducive environment for hearing God's voice. The point is that Samuel was in a place where hearing God's voice was going to be much more likely. There weren't a host of competing distractions.

Think about your daily life. How often are you in a place where it's conducive to hearing God's voice? For most of us, not very often. Let me suggest some places where hearing God's voice isn't going to happen very easily—at work, in the classroom at school, watching TV or at the movies, going to an athletic event, the mall, running errands, doing homework or chores around the house, eating meals, being online or on the phone.

Our lives are so full of activities and busy-ness that it's hard to hear God's voice. We need to be in a place that's quiet and away from the rush of life. I don't know where that place is for you. It can be different places for different people. But this I know. Hearing God's voice is indeed rare if you're always in the place of noise and busy activity. We need to be in a secluded place regularly with an attitude of quiet and rest from the busy pace of life. That's where we can hear God speak.

### **Lesson #4—To hear God, we need to listen to God rather than speak (vs. 10).**

Samuel said to the Lord in verse 10, "Speak, for Your servant is listening." That's so often different from what we're used to. Here's what we say to God most of the time, "Listen, Lord, for Your servant is speaking."

Friends, that characterizes most of our modern-day praying. We want God to be quiet while we talk.

It needs to be the other way around. We need to be quiet while God talks. He has a lot to say to us if we're willing to listen. And what He has to say to us is far more significant than what we have to say to Him. I think one of the great-est adjustments we can make in our prayers is to listen to God while we shut up.

I'm talking about periods of time when we're before the Lord and we're not saying anything. We're just silent. We're waiting on the Lord in a meditative spirit. Perhaps we've just read a portion of the Bible and we need to see how it applies to our lives. Perhaps we're reviewing before the Lord where our lives are and we're asking Him to speak into our lives right where we're living it.

**Let me tell you some of the things the Lord might want to say as we listen in silence for His voice.**

- \*Here's something about Me that I want you to see.
- \*Here's a promise from Me I want you to claim.
- \*This is a sin in your life you need to confess or forsake.
- \*Here's a person in your life I want you to encourage or confront.
- \*Here's a person I want you to share the good news of Jesus with.
- \*There's a priority in your life that needs to be changed.
- \*It's time to make a certain decision.
- \*Here's a command I want you to obey.
- \*Here's a lesson I want you to learn.

God wants to speak to us in ways like this. But we must be listening to Him instead of talking. And we must have a pen in hand ready to write down and do what He says.

**Lesson #5—To hear God, we need a tolerance for hard truth (vss. 11-18).**

What God says to Samuel in verses 11-14 is absolutely amazing to me. I'd expect the Lord to say to a 12-year old boy, "Samuel, the time has come for us to have a personal chat. I've chosen you to be My special servant and prophet to Israel. You're doing a fine job for Me and when you become a young man, I'll be asking you to say and do some pretty hard things for Me. But in the meantime, enjoy your youth and continue to grow in your relationship with Me." God didn't say anything close to that.

God told Samuel about the judgment He planned for the family of Eli and why. This is pretty heavy stuff for a boy and I've had to ask myself why God would do this. The only reason I can think of is that God was testing young Samuel to see if he had the stuff to be a prophet. A prophet had to say some pretty hard things. Would Samuel step up? Samuel did.

The truth is, when God speaks, it's not always going to be pleasant. God is a truth teller and sometimes what God has to say is difficult to hear. Generally speaking, we want God to tell us what we want to hear. But God doesn't play that game.

I have a 3 year-old granddaughter. Sometimes we tell her things she doesn't want to hear. She puts her hands over her ears so she can't hear what we're saying. That's not a good thing to do with God. Whenever God has a hard message for us, it's for our good in the end. We need to be willing to hear hard truths about ourselves and situations and circumstances around us.

We need a tolerance for the hard message or we'll never be able to address what's wrong or what needs to be changed. I've discovered that accepting the difficult word from God is just as necessary as hearing the pleasing word from God. We must be willing to hear both from God. If we're not willing to hear hard truth, God will stop speaking to us. And that's the major reason I believe that verse 1 says, "Word from the Lord was rare in those days."

How is our tolerance to hear the hard things from God? If we're really going to be listening to God, we need a willingness to hear a difficult word from God.

## Conclusion:

1. I've taken the story of God's encounter with young Samuel to draw 5 lessons for listening to God. Let me review them.

1) To hear God, we need a servant's spirit. We can't be running our own lives.

2) To hear God, we need a discerning ear. We need to be able to pick out God's voice from the many voices out there.

3) To hear God, we need a conducive environment. We can't be in the clutter of noise and movement all the time.

4) To hear God, we need to listen to God rather than speak. Most of the time, we do the talking and God does the listening. It needs to be the other way around.

5) To hear God, we need a tolerance for hard truth. We must be willing to accept something difficult from God for what's best rather than what makes us feel good.

2. I'm convinced that if we practice these 5 lessons, we'll hear clearly from God. As far as I'm concerned, the most important thing in life is listening to God. Not to hear His voice on a regular basis is to court disaster.

3. I want to close with an experience I had that's fairly close to Samuel's experience. This kind of thing doesn't happen often in my life, but I want to share it with you as an encouragement that God can still speak in remarkable ways to us today.

4. It was Saturday morning, January 6, 2001. At 5:45 in the morning, I woke up. For me, that's an ungodly hour on a Saturday morning. But I sensed a voice inside me saying, "Get before Me on the floor downstairs. In your daily reading I have a word for you." I thought maybe I was dreaming and I rolled over. The 2nd time, I sensed the same message. I looked at the clock and said to myself, "I'm going back to sleep and I'll care for this when I get up." I rolled over again.

5. I sensed an even stronger urgency when I discerned a voice inside me say, "If you don't obey me now, I won't call again and I won't do the work in you that I want to do." That caught my attention.

6. You need to know that I was in a very low spot in my life at that time. And so was the church. Well, I got up and went downstairs. I got on my belly before the Lord and opened my Bible to the passage for the day. What I read was absolutely incredible.

7. It was about Jacob who was greatly afraid and distressed. The passage was so about my journey at that time. Jacob wrestled with God until daybreak. Then Jacob asked God His name. I did the same thing and at 6:15 in the morning, God gave me His name for the circumstances I was in. I wrote it down in the margin of my Bible. God said, "My Name is Deliverer". That's the name God showed me about Himself that morning!

8. I'm convinced that God called to me 3 times that morning in my bed. Reluctantly, I listened to God and He changed the course of my life. The next morning when I got to church, I noticed a remarkably different spirit in the church. Others noticed it too. And from that day to this, God has been blessing our church in a new way.

9. From that point on, our church began to grow again and God has led us into our relocation project. I for one am a total believer that God still speaks today if we're listening.

10. If today's message has been a message from God to you to get you to listen more to Him, I want you to make a response to Him that you'll be more serious than ever about listening for His voice. I'd like you to get on your knees before God and in a spirit of prayer, say to Him, "Speak, Lord, for Your servant is listening." This could change your life! Do it right now.