

Speak, LORD; Your Servant Is Listening

1 Samuel 3:1-10 (NIV84)

¹ 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 temple 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 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. 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."

How cool it must have been to be Samuel! The LORD appears, standing there, calling to him by name. Wow. What would you even do in a situation like that? I don't even know. Maybe after the initial shock and after burying my head in the dirt worshiping him, hopefully I would recognize I have a direct audience with the LORD. Time to pull out that list of questions that my pastor told me to ask God when I got to heaven. Let's do it now. "Okay, God, I just gotta ask. Wait. Listen. Listen to me. Just "shhh." I have things I want to ask. I'll listen to you in a minute, but I want you to listen to me right now. God. God. God. Listen, God. I have questions that need answering. God, are you listening? Listen, God." As much as we would like to dive in and start asking God all those questions we have stored up that only he knows the answers to, we are kind of going in the complete opposite direction of Samuel.

Samuel was a pretty special boy. He came about after his mother, Hannah, who had lived many years not able to have children, poured her heart out to the LORD that he would provide a son for her. She promised that if the LORD answered her prayer, she would "give him to the LORD for all the days of his life." (1 Samuel 1:11) The LORD granted Hannah's request, and Hannah kept her vow. As soon as the boy was finished nursing, she brought him to the tabernacle - the Israelite meeting place of worship - and entrusted little Samuel to the care of the high priest Eli.

In our verses today, Samuel is about 12 or so - still a boy, not a man - and he has a religious experience. The LORD talks to him. This is in a time when the Word of the LORD was rare. There were not many visions. Not many people, if any, could say, "Yes, the LORD spoke to me yesterday." Samuel didn't understand this at first. He was used to having his name called out because he took care of old Eli "whose eyes were becoming so weak that he could barely see." (verse 2) So, when he first hears his name being called out, "Samuel! Samuel!" naturally his instinct is to run over to Eli and say, "Here I am; you called me." (verse 4)

But Eli knew he hadn't called Samuel. He tells him to go back to bed. It isn't until the third time this happens that Eli knows something else is going on. Then he tells Samuel, "Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.'" (verse 9) Don't ask all the questions that you are desperately wanting the answers to; just listen. Samuel does exactly that.

Our verses end today with Samuel simply saying, "Speak, for your servant is listening," (verse 10) and we are left on the edge of our seats wondering, "What is the LORD going to say?" The message was: "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 made themselves contemptible, and [Eli] failed to restrain them." (1 Samuel 3:12-13) Were you expecting that? Do you think if the LORD spoke to you that this would be the message he gives?

We all like the idea of being so honored, so chosen by God, that he would directly reveal himself to us and talk to us. It would set us apart from other Christians. That attitude places listening to God as something more along the lines of a cool experience for a status update on Facebook or a selfie tweet #talkingtogod. If we had been in Samuel's place, would "Speak, LORD; your servant is listening" be more about us talking to and about the LORD than the LORD speaking to us? Do we even want to hear what the LORD has to say or do we just want to have the experience of the LORD talking to us?

I imagine Eli was somewhat caught in that same kind of trance. "Samuel talked to the LORD. I can't wait to hear what he said!" The next morning Eli made Samuel swear to tell him everything from the vision. You can imagine how the excitement turned in on itself

as he heard, "The LORD is going to judge you. You failed as a father. You did not restrain your sons from sinning. You allowed them to make a mockery of the LORD's house. They despised the offerings that came, taking the best for themselves, not giving it to God. They profaned God's place of worship by sleeping with the women who worked at the entrance. Your sons will die on the same day. Not a single member of your family will reach old age. Eli, you failed the LORD. He will raise someone else up in your place." Eli's response? "He is the LORD; let him do what is good in his eyes."

If we were Eli, when would we have said, "Stop, LORD; your servant isn't listening anymore"? When it comes to the warm fuzzies, bring it on. I'm all ears. Tell me that you love me. Tell me that I can't do anything to drive you out of my life. Tell me that you are going to cure my loneliness. Tell me that you are going to heal my body. Tell me that you will provide for me as the bills are stacking up and I am emotionally drained. Tell me that you are going to make it all better.

But the LORD says to us things like he said to Eli. "You need to be a better father. You need to spend more time and effort teaching your children about me. You need to take time for your bride, listen to her more, care for her needs over your own. I expect you to give more of yourself to the church - of your time, talents, and treasures. I know you prayed for healing, but not yet. I have something else planned for you. Yes, these are sins, and no, they are not okay. Failure at any point leads to hell. Yes, your family member who reject me will go to hell if they do not listen to me."

Stop, LORD; your servant isn't listening! You keep shoving my face in all the ways that I fail to be the perfect person you want me to be, and I can't take it anymore. You make me feel all guilty and judged. I don't want to listen to this. I won't listen to this. Knowing that Samuel heard a message of judgment when he listened to the LORD, how can we say, "Speak, LORD; your servant is listening"?

The end all and be all of what the LORD says to us is not judgment. He certainly says this to us; he means for us to hear it. In fact, he needs us to hear it. We need to feel all guilty and judged. Why? So that we recognize the need for a Savior.

The LORD is not a one-sided, one dimensional character. When he speaks to us, he does not just tell us how bad we are, how we are not meeting his expectations, how he is not going to answer our prayers in the way we want, that our wrongs merit for us judgment and hell-fire. Yes, this is what the LORD says to us; it's what he said to Eli, but this is not everything. If speaking to the LORD is only about the warm fuzzies or the experience, then we missed the content. It's as if we said, "Speak, LORD; your servant is listening...really, I am...Wait, what did you say?"

Take this in just for a moment. The LORD actually talks to you and me. He really does. You've already heard him talking to you. That's what the Bible is. It may not be a vision like what Samuel had, but the LORD has and continues to faithfully preserve his Word generation after generation. We listen to his voice whenever we read from the Bible, whenever we listen to the Bible. These are not words conjured by men or corrupted by people over centuries, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. Jesus himself says to us that this is his Word and that he will never let disappear or fade away as long as the earth endures. He spoke to us and continues to speak to us through his Word so that he could tell us the one way to be saved. The LORD speaks to us in the Bible that we may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, the one chosen to take away our sins and our judgment, and that by believing we all may have life in his name.

It's easy to focus only on the judgment and guilt, but listen a little longer. As the LORD speaks to you and me from his Word, he tells us that we were bought at a price, the price of his life. His words, his speaking to us, conveying this message, made us a temple of the Holy Spirit, the place where he dwells in our hearts by faith, making us holy and blameless in his sight. The LORD has articulated to us the words that restore and build us up, words that raise us from spiritual death to life, words that bring something into being that was nothing before. When we ask God, "Speak, LORD; your servant is listening," we are asking to hear the same voice and same words that brought all things into being, that judged Satan and cast him into hell, that gave people hope in knowing that the LORD does what he says and would send a Savior to spare all of us from the judgment we deserve. When we listen, the LORD speaks healing for us and makes it happen.

When we say like Samuel, "Speak, LORD; your servant is listening," we are asking him for what he has to say to us, not what we want to hear from him. We are asking to hear the sin and the judgment we deserve as well as the undeserved forgiveness and salvation that he has given us. When we ask the LORD to speak, we are asking for his Word to change my life. LORD, may your Word work in me a new life and a new attitude that is willing to serve you knowing that you always keep your Word. "Speak, LORD; your servant is listening." Amen.