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Samuel: God's Listening Servant
1 Samuel 3

Are you a good listener?

How well do you listen to others? To your co-workers? To your friends? To your family? To God?

One of the biggest sources of the problems in our relationships—whether it's at home or at work or in the church—is a lack of communication. Now sometimes that's because we fail to express ourselves clearly and honestly and accurately. But often it's more because we fail to *listen attentively*.

This may be the source of some of our greatest problems in our relationship with God as well, both as individuals and as a church. It's not just that we don't listen to each other. *We don't listen to God.*

Now I'm not a big fan of the *Touched by an Angel* television series. Too much of what's portrayed in it simply isn't consistent with the biblical teachings about angels. But Jo Ann and I have been watching it some lately in the evenings.

Sometimes some of the stories are very touching, and sometimes there are some good insights.

In an episode that was on this week, Monica the angel makes the observation: "Why is that when you talk to God, it's called prayer, but when you hear him talking to you, they say you're crazy?"

Good question, isn't it?

Samuel's story

This text we're looking at this morning from 1 Samuel 3 is about God's speaking and Samuel's listening. I like to call Samuel *God's listening servant*.

To know Samuel's story, you really have to back up to the first two chapters of the book of 1 Samuel.

His parents were Hannah and Elkanah. Hannah had been unable to have children. Once when Elkanah had taken his family to the house of the LORD in Shiloh, Hannah stood up after the ceremonial meal and poured out her heart to God in bitterness of soul. She wept as she prayed, and made a vow to the LORD that if he gave her a son, she would "give him back to the LORD for all the days of his life" (1:11).¹

¹ Scripture quotations are from the *New International Version*.

As she prayed, the old priest Eli saw that her mouth was moving but he didn't hear her voice. He didn't realize she was praying in her heart; he thought she was drunk! He reprimanded her, but she explained that she was deeply troubled and had been pouring out her soul to God.

So Eli blessed her, saying, "Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant what you have asked of him" (1:17).

And God did. Within a year, Hannah gave birth to a son, and named him Samuel—a name that sounds like the Hebrew phrase for "heard of God."²

Once Samuel was weaned, Hannah honored her vow and took him to live with Eli the priest at the house of the LORD in Shiloh.

Our text tells us in 3:1 that "the boy Samuel ministered before the LORD under Eli." Then it says, "In those days the word of the LORD was rare; there were not many visions" (3:1). God wasn't talking much at this point. Maybe it was because nobody was really listening.

Then one night, Eli had gone to bed in his usual place and Samuel was lying down in the temple. The lamp of God had not yet burned out for the night. And the LORD called Samuel. Samuel heard him and immediately responded, "Here I am." But he thought it was Eli calling him, so he went to him. He told Eli, "Here I am; you called me." Eli told him he didn't call him, and that he should go back and lie down.

The LORD called Samuel again, and again he went to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me." And Eli said, "My son, I did not call; go back and lie down."

The writer tells us in verse 7 that Samuel didn't yet know the LORD, and that his word had not yet been revealed to him. That would explain why he thought it was Eli calling him.

But then the LORD called Samuel for the third time. And for the third time, he went to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me."

Now we can understand Samuel's thinking that it was Eli calling him. He was a boy, and he didn't yet know the LORD. He had no experience with these things.

But Eli was the priest of God and was very old. He had lived and ministered at the house of the LORD all these years. But he had become so familiar with the things of God that he was missing the obvious.

Finally, when Samuel came to him the *third* time, Eli realized that it was the LORD calling Samuel. So he told Samuel, "Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.'"

Samuel did just as Eli told him. When the LORD called him yet again, he answered, "Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening."

The importance of listening

You know, listening really is a powerful act. We all need to be heard at one time or another. Just watch children sometimes and observe the great lengths they'll go to in order to make sure someone is hearing them!

Listening to someone can be a real ministry. Sometimes in the midst of our heartaches and trials and confusions, we just need someone to listen to us.

And sometimes we need to listen to someone else for guidance and understanding. In our excessive individualism in today's North American culture, we often think nobody can tell us anything, especially if they're over 30 years old. But sometimes there's wisdom in listening to others who have been farther down the road, especially if they've been following Jesus as they went!

² NIV translators' footnote on 1 Samuel 1:20.

Most of all, we need to listen to God in these situations. As Henry Blackaby emphasizes in his study *Experiencing God: Knowing and Doing the Will of God*, “God speaks by the Holy Spirit through the Bible, prayer, circumstances, and the church.”³ Sometimes we’re not sure it’s God speaking, but if all these things line up, we can be pretty confident it’s God!

Our problem is that when it comes to our conversation with God, we’re like the lady Jo Ann and I met one time in a hospital waiting room while the nurses and technicians were working with the person we were visiting. She was an older lady, just as nice as she could be. And you could tell that family was what was most important to her by the way she talked about her children and grandchildren. We found out a lot about her in just a little while. The only problem was that we could hardly respond to anything she said! Jo Ann managed to squeeze in just a few sentences. I got in one or two, and wanted to say something else. But after waiting for an opening for about five minutes, I finally gave up.

Do you think God might feel that way about our conversations with him? It does seem like we do all the talking, doesn’t it? Maybe sometimes—maybe *most* of the time—we need to be like Samuel, and just *listen*.

Not always what we want to hear

As Samuel listened, he heard a hard message from the LORD. It was the message that judgment was coming on Eli’s house because of the sinfulness of his sons and their corruption of the priesthood, and Eli’s failure to restrain them in it. It was a hard message for the boy to hear.

And what may have been even harder was when the next morning, Eli insisted that Samuel tell him what the LORD had said to him. Eli was Samuel’s guardian and mentor. And now he had to give him this message. But he did it, and Eli accepted it as a word from God.

And from then on, the writer tells us:

The LORD was with Samuel as he grew up, and he let none of his words fall to the ground The LORD continued to appear at Shiloh, and there he revealed himself to Samuel through his word. And Samuel’s word came to all Israel.

As a child and throughout his life, Samuel listened to the LORD and served him faithfully. Later he led the people of Israel, and even after they demanded a king, King Saul looked to him for the word of the LORD, because he knew Samuel listened to God.

As Samuel listened to God, it was more than once that he heard a message that was hard to hear. Not only did he receive the message of judgment on Eli’s house; he also had to pronounce God’s judgment on his own people to persuade them to turn back to God. And he had to tell King Saul that God had rejected him from being king because of his disobedience.

Sometimes God’s message to us is hard to listen to.

“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it”
(Mark 8:34-35).

³ Henry T. Blackaby and Claude V. King, *Experiencing God: How to Live the Full Adventure of Knowing and Doing the Will of God* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 32.

“Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship” (Romans 12:1).

“I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day” (John 6:53-54).

John tells us that many of those following Jesus at that point turned away when they heard this one. Jesus asked the Twelve, “You do not want to leave too, do you?” Peter answered for them, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God” (John 6:67-69).

No matter how hard the message, we must listen. We can’t just listen when we want to, or when it’s a message of comfort or encouragement, because God speaks to *all of life*. We can’t just take the words we like and leave the rest. *We have to listen to them all.*

And we must listen carefully. Sometimes we misunderstand. Sometimes we only hear part of what God is saying. We have to listen carefully. We have to be “all ears.” After all, the God of the universe is speaking!

That’s what Samuel did. He was God’s *faithful* servant because he was God’s *listening* servant. He listened to what God said and did as God told him.

Isn’t that what Samuel’s story is really all about? *To be a faithful servant of God, we have to listen to him attentively.*

Not just to hear what he says, but to obey him.

Not being just hearers of the word, but doers (James 1:22-25).

Not just to gain information, but to experience transformation, and to be used by God in the transformation of the world around us.

Not just as individual believers, but as a church, as those who have believed the good news of Jesus Christ, who have received his forgiveness of our sins, who have been set right with God through our faith in him, and who are the company of his disciples, the fellowship of his followers, the body of Christ.

Are you listening?

Are *we* listening?

Will we hear him?

Will we *obey* him?

“Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.”

†MEG