

**THE CALL OF THE LORD**  
*Hearing God's Call In A Postmodern World*

Our Sunday messages this month and next are from stories of faithfulness and failure found in the O. T. book of 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel. Two weeks ago I began by sharing Hannah's story and how her faithfulness gave Israel (and us) a great spiritual leader during a time of moral decay. Her first son, Samuel, became one of Israel's greatest priests and prophets at a time when people desperately needed to hear God's word. We learned how vital it is to pray, pray, pray and to honor our vows to the Lord. Hannah's vow to dedicate her son Samuel to the Lord's service brought immeasurable blessings to Israel. And Samuel's dad, Elkanah, prepared his son for godly service by faithfully bringing his family to worship. There is no greater purpose for our children than for them to know and serve the Lord.

Last week Andrew shared with us a story of contrast ... it was about the priest Eli's sons, who did wicked things, even though they'd been brought up in the house of the Lord. When his sons took advantage of their position by taking offerings for themselves, Eli did not reign them in. He indulged them and their desires, rather than loving them with proper discipline. It brought destruction to Eli and his household. When we put anything other than God first, and that includes our children, we are courting disaster for our families. But when we put God first in our family we allow blessings to flow into our lives.

Today we pick up the story of Samuel again. You recall that his birth was actually a miracle, for Hannah his mother, had been barren for many years. God answered her fervent prayers for a child and she dedicated him to the Lord. He stayed with Eli the priest, to serve the Lord at the temple. Then one night he heard the call of God ... a very personal and directed called.

**Not Ready to Listen**

For, decades, if not centuries, God had rarely spoken to His people. *"The word of the Lord was rare; there were not many visions"* 1 Sam. 3:1. The spiritual life of the temple was in disarray due to the wickedness of Eli's two sons and Eli's failure to restrain them. One night, as he lay near the lamp of God and the Ark of the Covenant (both symbols of God's presence), Samuel heard God calling. But he thought it was the voice of Eli, the priest. Understandably so: Samuel had lived his entire life in the temple with Eli, who was like a father to him and served as his spiritual mentor. Finally, Eli discerned that the boy was being called by the Lord. So he advised him to submit and wait upon the Lord and to say, *"Speak Lord, for your servant is listening."*

Despite his familiarity with the temple and worship maybe Samuel hadn't been taught that God wants an individual and personal connection with His people. Do we teach that to our children? Let's consider several myths about hearing from God.

**Myth #1: God only speaks to spiritual giants.** Samuel was but a boy and it still took years for him to grow into God's role for him. Recall that Moses wasn't a spiritual giant either, likewise Jesus' disciples. Rarely have I heard lay members of Christian congregations express their sense of call. However, one active lay woman challenged my disappointment when she asked, "What makes you think we do not sense God's call?" She was right, of course, to pose that question. Too often we've assumed that it was the pastors or priests who are called by God. Despite the record of the Church's past, God's call is not limited to a special few.

Scripture makes plain that God wants to be in close relationship with all people. From the beginning God has been calling people. God called after Adam and Eve, *"Where are you?"* (Genesis 3:9). When Jesus called people to follow him (Mark 1:16-20); he was calling them to walk with God. The apostle Paul used the term "call" to remind early Christians of God's

invitation and claim on their lives (1 Corinthians 1:26-31). It is possible for all people to hear from God.

**Myth #2:** If I am in tune with God, He will guide all my decisions. Not really. God doesn't speak to all people at the same time in the same way and about everything. Even St. Paul didn't have a word from God on every matter. *"To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord)..."* 1 Cor. 7:12. Many times you must make decisions on your own ... God is trusting you to do so in harmony with Him.

**Myth #3:** God's voice is a very subjective, individualistic trump card I can use to get my way. God can speak to us in a variety of ways, but His primary method is the "still, small voice" (1 Kings 9:12). God can guide our thoughts directly, or through another person, or a written text, especially the Bible. Beware when someone says, "I felt led" or "I feel called." We are easily self-deceived into claiming from God what we *want* instead of what He wants. Christian author Dallas Willard, in his book *Hearing God*, suggests three factors to help us recognize God's voice:

- **Tone** – the voice of God will always have a weightiness to it. It comes with confidence, and we

recognize it as something that we didn't think up on our own. Many times God's call will surprise us.

- **Spirit** – The spirit of God's voice is one of peacefulness and joy – it is a warm presence of good

will in our lives. It is not the voice of a bully – it will not impose itself upon us. A description of the spirit of God's voice is found in James 3:17 as *"the wisdom from above."*

- **Content** – Here is probably the most reliable factor in discerning God's call. If the voice we are hearing contradicts what we find in the Bible, then we can be certain it is not the voice of God.

The call of God is an expression of God's nature, not our nature. The call of God is not the echo of my affinities or preferences. My desires or personal temperament are not relevant. As long as I focus on what I think I am fitted for, I shall never hear the call of God. When I am brought into a vital relationship with God, I enter into the same condition Samuel was in. Notice that when God first called Samuel he thought it was Eli calling him; and that is because *"... Samuel did not yet know the Lord: the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him,"* 1 Sam. 3:7.

**Myth #4:** There is nothing I can do to hear from God. Not true! *"Samuel was ministering before the Lord, a boy girded with a linen ephod,"* 1 Sam. 2:18. Samuel was prepared to enter a vital relationship with the Lord because he already knew how to worship the Lord, so that his soul was attuned to God. The majority of us have no ear for anything but ourselves and so we cannot hear the things God says. To be brought into that place where we meet God and know Him for who He truly is, is to be brought into the zone of His calling. We worship each week, we read the Bible together, we pray together, so as to prepare our hearts to be attuned to God that we might hear His call. Wouldn't that be something profoundly important to teach our children by example? To be able to hear God's call is to be profoundly altered and enriched, and to make a profound and positive impact on our families and society.

In the early 1900s, back when the telegraph was the fastest method of long-distance communication, a young man applied for a job as a Morse Code operator. Answering an ad in the newspaper, he went to the office address that was listed. When he arrived, he entered a large, busy office filled with noise and clatter, including the sound of the telegraph in the background. A sign on the receptionist's counter instructed job applicants to fill out a form and wait until they were summoned to enter the inner office.

The young man filled out his form and sat down with the seven other applicants in the waiting area. After a few minutes, the young man stood up, crossed the room to the door of the inner office, and walked right in. Naturally the other applicants perked up, wondering what was

going on. They muttered among themselves that they hadn't heard any summons yet. They assumed that the young man who went into the office made a mistake and would be disqualified.

Within a few minutes, however, the employer escorted the young man out of the office and said to the other applicants, "Gentlemen, thank you very much for coming, but the job has just been filled."

The other applicants began grumbling to each other, and one spoke up saying, "Wait a minute, I don't understand. He was the last to come in, and we never even got a chance to be interviewed. Yet he got the job. That's not fair!"

The employer said, "I'm sorry, but all the time you've been sitting here, the telegraph has been ticking out the following message in Morse Code: 'If you understand this message, then come right in. The job is yours.' None of you heard it or understood it. This young man did. The job is his." The young man came prepared to listen and to hear.

### Listen Before God Will Speak

It is easy to think that God is chattering away all the time, and all we have to do is tune in when it's convenient. But Eli's advice to the young Samuel reveals something else. To have an attitude that says, "*Speak, for your servant is listening*" is essential to hearing from God. Samuel had to listen before God would fully speak and then Eli had to listen before God spoke through Samuel. God may call us, but then God will wait for us to stop, to be still, and to listen. What is the greatest obstacle that prevents you from listening for God's voice? What will you do to be more attentive? Turn off the radio in the car? "*Speak, for your servant is listening.*" Turn off your TV? "*Speak, for your servant is listening.* Go for a walk w/o iPhone? "*Speak, for your servant is listening.* Set aside 5 minutes in your day to sit before the Lord? "*Speak, for your servant is listening.*"

We live in a world that is full of busyness and clatter. People are distracted, many voices shout for our attention—deadlines to meet, bills to pay, meetings to attend, phone calls to make, emails to answer, children to care for. What about you? Can you tune in to God's voice? Are you listening? I'm hard-pressed to think of anything more important.

### God Calls Many ... Including You

Many years ago I was sitting around a campfire with some youth from another church where I was pastor. One of them asked why I chose to become a pastor. I thought a moment and then answered that I didn't really choose; rather, it was more like I was chosen by God to serve Him in this way. I have confessed to some friends that I have often thought that God called the wrong guy ... I do not think I have the right temperament, or talents, insight, or wisdom to serve God well in this capacity. Sometimes I have felt like the prophet Jeremiah when he complained to God, "*... But if I say, 'I will not mention his word or speak anymore in his name,' his word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot,*" Jeremiah 20:7-9.

After nearly 36 years I am seeing more clearly that God can and has used me for good and to speak His word. But more profoundly I have realized that my best service for Him has been in those times when I have prayed, prayed, and prayed, and leaned on Him, trusted in Him, and walked with Him. Not in His name, but in Him. And that is all God is looking for in any one of us.

The O. T. book of Isaiah records how the prophet heard from God ... he was actually in the Temple worshipping and he heard, "*Who shall I send? And who will go for us? And I said, 'Here am I. Send me'*" Isaiah 6:8. It was almost as though Isaiah *overheard* God calling. Whether or not I hear God's call depends very much upon my disposition. Many are called but few pick up the phone when it's God calling. "Many are called, but few are chosen." The chosen ones are those who have come into a vital relationship with God through Jesus Christ, who is gradually

reshaping their disposition so that their ears are unstopped and their hearts are retuned, so that they can hear the still small voice of God asking, "Will you go for us?"

God did not demand that Isaiah go for Him. God does not come to any of us with compulsions or pleadings. When Jesus called His disciples there was nothing forcing them to respond. His quiet insistence of "Follow me" was spoken to men who were wide awake and able to decide for themselves. In freedom they chose to follow Jesus. In freedom we too are able to respond to God's call.

If we let the Spirit of God bring us face to face with God, we too shall hear something like what Isaiah heard, or like what Samuel heard, or what many other dedicated disciples, who brought God's word into their lives, families, churches, and workplaces, have heard. They all have made a profound impact on the world.

God is calling ... do not be one who leaves his spiritual phone off the hook.

*"As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him— you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ," 1 Peter 2:4-5.*