

First Persons: Samuel (Breaking In, Breaking Away)

1 Samuel 3: 1-21

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I Introduction

My name is Samuel. I've been a prophet in Israel for a long, long time. I've seen a lot of changes in our land. I got to anoint our first king, and then later see him fall before I anointed David. I watched as our motley collection of tribes formed themselves into a powerful nation. All during that time I tried to speak God's word to God's people, but as I've gotten older I can't help but think back on that night so many years ago as I stood on that cusp between childhood and adulthood and heard God call my name.

II. The Lord's Approach

I was serving in the shrine at Shiloh under the priest Eli. Shiloh was a little town. You probably don't know it now. It's about 30 miles north of Jerusalem. We kept the Ark of the Covenant there when the armies weren't carrying it out into battle. There was, of course, no temple at that point because Jerusalem was still a city held by the Jebusites and King David had not even been born yet - much less chosen it as our capital. Shiloh was a small place and the Ark was kept in a complex of tents where we stayed offering sacrifices that people would bring to honor God.

I had grown up there. My mom was crazy religious. She had given me to Eli, brought me to the shrine when I was just a tiny boy to fulfill a vow that she had made to God. My father had a number of other children from his second wife and didn't seem particularly to mind that I had been sent away, and they knew that I would be well taken

care of. Eli was a wonderful man and an upright priest. He treated me like a son even though he had a couple of sons of his own, Phineas and Hophni. Well, they were wild children. I know pastor's children are often a little bit wild, but these two were just out of control. They just ran havoc in Shiloh. They'd steal the sacrificial meat. They'd paid no respect to the Ark of the Covenant. So in many respects, I was the son Eli wished he had had because I understood what we were doing there.

It was a turbulent time in our nation's history. The Philistines were always attacking us and we'd have a judge who would get raised up by God to repel them. But the people were restless. They wanted a king like the other countries had, and they were religiously restless too. There was this sense that God had stopped speaking to us as a people. When we read those wonderful old stories of Moses and Abraham, it seemed like God was always talking to people then. It didn't seem like God was talking to us anymore. None of the good self-respecting church folks would ever say that they had heard God's voice. People would think they were crazy, which may have been what made that night so hard and so bizarre.

III The Lord's Message

I had fallen asleep where I always did, right outside where the Ark was kept because I was responsible for keeping the lamp lit. Moses had told us that we always had to have the lamp lit in front of the Ark during the night, and so I always stayed there to make sure that it's stayed lit. Eli was in a different tent next door. I woke up in the middle of the night. I didn't know that time it was, but I did what I always do - which was I checked the oil. The oil was getting kind of low so it must have been fairly close to

dawn. I heard my name and I assumed it was Eli. Eli was getting old and he didn't see very well at that point, and so he was often calling me to run errands for him. So I assumed that he had woken up, because old folks wake up a lot in the middle of the night, and needed something. I popped up and ran to the next tent, and Eli was awake as soon as I walked in the door. I said, "What do you need, Eli?" He said, "I don't need anything. I didn't call you." I said, "Well, I heard my name." He said, "It must have been a dream. You should go back to sleep. Stop bothering me."

So I went back and I had hardly lay down and closed my eyes when I heard my name again. Then I figured, well, since Eli was up he must have figured out something he needed and called me so I ran back over and I said, "What can I do?" He was getting a little frustrated at this point and he said, "I didn't call you. Go back to bed." I went back to bed and, again, had hardly laid down when I heard my name a third time. I was starting to get a little freaked out at this point. The only people I knew that heard voices were crazy people, and I didn't want to be one of them. But with some trepidation, I walked back over to Eli's tent a third time and I said, "Did you call me this time?" Eli, who was a very wise man – he didn't know how to control his sons, but he was a wise man - said, "I think God may be calling you, so if you hear your name again stay in your bed and say 'Speak, Lord, your servant listens.'"

I went back and, sure enough, almost immediately I heard the voice and I said, "Speak Lord, your servant listens." Then I had these words appear in my head. It was pretty disconcerting and it was also not what I expected in that I had expected something general -- I don't even know what, love your neighbor or something kind of vague. But these words were very specific. "Tell Eli that I have been warning him that

his sons were going to ruin his house. At this point, it's too late for there to be any way to make that up." It was a little disconcerting to know that God was paying that close attention to me or to Phineas and Hophni. And I was also struck by the irony of the fact that the man who had taught me how to listen was the one that God really wanted to speak to. I realized it wasn't really about me. I was sort of the mouthpiece for this message that God wanted to give, and then it was done. There wasn't any flash of light or big dramatic close. In fact, I was left with this sense that we'd be talking again and God would have some more things to share with the people through me.

IV Hard Conversations

But I didn't know what to do with that message. I mean how do you tell the man who raised you, your father, that God was going to end his house? I was hoping that a word from God would be uplifting and hopeful, and this was a word of judgment. Honestly, I don't know if I had had the choice myself if I would even have the nerve to tell him. But as soon as the sun was up, he was badgering me and I knew I couldn't lie. I did tell him what God had said. He responded as I would have assumed he would have responded. He didn't try to justify. He didn't get angry. He just said, "It's God's will."

I've been thinking to myself what would have been helpful for me to know as a young man on the verge of adulthood about God's call. The first thing that strikes my mind is that I would have wanted to know that God's voice was not silent, that God had a word and has a word to speak to each of us. That word comes in different ways. Sometimes it may be that very clear, those words in our head that are just so crystal

clear and unavoidable. Sometimes that voice comes from different people who start saying the same thing to us. I started to realize that when three people who are not connected say the same thing to me, something is going on there that I should pay attention to. Sometimes it's through the words of Scripture or a powerful book that I have read. Sometimes it may happen when you take a course that you hadn't known anything about, and all of a sudden it's like it was a natural for you and you thrived in it and loved it.

V. Conclusion

So I think I would have wanted someone to tell me to make sure you're paying attention because God is seeking to speak a word wherever you are. I think I'm also grateful to have a person like Eli to help me pay attention, someone who could listen to what I was experiencing and help me identify where God might have been moving. Who are the Elis for you that can help you start to see where the Spirit is speaking? It would have also been helpful to have known that sometimes the word that gets spoken is not a comfortable word and sometimes that word leads us to uncomfortable places, calls us to do things that are a little bit outside of our comfort zone and often, as in my case, started me on a path that my mentor Eli could have never imagined for me.

I realize now that part of that process for me was a process of separation, of taking all that Eli had taught me over the years and then making that my own which might lead me in some paths that Eli would never have guessed at for me. But I'd also want to know that as scary and as unsettling as that is and as unsettling as transition times can be, that that word that God is seeking to speak to us is a word of life and that

wherever we go on the path that God has led us, God is walking with us.

Amen