

## **HOW TO HEAR THE VOICE OF GOD**

### **1 Samuel 3**

**Dr. George O. Wood**

Today, I want to talk about some ordinary people who are part of this ministry. We've been going through 1 Samuel, and we see Samuel saying, "Here I am!" I can't think of a better phrase to use with relation to ministry. There are hundreds of testimonies in this church body from people who have either been ministered to or God has used to minister to others. We've received a number of written testimonies.

I think of Jerry and Patricia. Jerry is in his late sixties. Until four years ago, Jerry had never gone to church. He was a committed agnostic. He had no time for God or for the church. He distrusted preachers with a passion. But his wife became a Christian. She was a closet Christian for a year, and she dared not suggest going to church to Jerry. But after a year, she began to feel impressed that the Lord was calling her to do something. One day, she came here. In the course of conversation, she found out there was a need for sewing in the church. We take things to the poor here in this community and elsewhere. She and her husband happened to own a sewing machine repair business. Nothing could make more sense than to serve the Lord by sewing. So she began to serve. Jerry, in turn, was led to the Lord in a phenomenal way, and they both began to get involved in ministry. Thank God for every person who comes to the Lord when they are a child. But also, thank God for those who come in their sixties, as Jerry and Patricia did.

I think of Louise who shared her story. Her daughter's situation needed some big changes, and some dramatic changes have taken place since she shared her need.

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Another couple in our church, Gary and Vicki, sought to have a child for ten years unsuccessfully. On our last women's retreat, one of our deacons felt impressed to share Isaiah 49:9 with Vicki, "Your time has come." Today, Vicki is expecting a child.

I'm reminded of Jorge and Valerie who began coming to the church about a year ago. In January, Valerie's mother found out she had advanced cancer. She went to live with Jorge and Valerie. She was too ill to attend church. One day Valerie dropped her prayer request in the offering. Valerie said that her mother was the first death in their family. They knew nothing about how to face dying or what procedures to go through. She said the church was a great help during that time.

And Cora and Jim are with Wycliffe Bible translators. For the last several years, Cora has had multiple sclerosis. She has episodes when it severely attacks her and times when it lessens. We've prayed time and again for Cora's complete healing. I'm glad to report that her condition has been improving. She writes, "The church prayed for me and ministered to me all through my confinement. Meals were provided months at a time. House cleaning is still being provided by various Sunday school classes." Cora even led one of the housekeepers to the Lord! Another young couple in our church had a difficult pregnancy. People brought them sermon tapes so they could share in worship because she is confined to bed. And meals were provided for them.

I think of Laurel, a single mother of five. Her son, Timothy, was hit by a car last Memorial Day weekend. A friend of hers called the church and asked if there was anything we could do. Some people got together from this church, and I think from other churches, and arranged for what Laurel needed at that time—someone who could sit with her son while she could work and keep bread on the table. Laurel writes, "The Lord assembled a wonderful group of volunteers to rotate caring for my son and who ministered love and encouragement to both him and me."

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Judy, at twenty-five years of age, became a widow just four months ago. After five years of marriage, her husband was suddenly taken in an auto accident. She writes, “Many people have dramatically touched my life through practical love and care. My husband was killed in a car accident. From the moment you heard of my loss, I’ve had someone from the church at my side.” She goes on to share who came, what happened, and how many came. Many people reached out to her. She says, “The Lord has definitely blessed this church with some of the most Christ-like people I’ve ever met. Everyone was willing to ‘do’—not just sit back and ‘pray.’” That’s what we often do—we say “I’ll pray for you.” But we need to do more than that. You have done more than that. She writes, “Many of my family members have wanted to know about this Christian life we lead.” There are so many more stories I could share. I want to thank God for this display of ministry.

The hardest words I ever had to confront were about ten years ago—people visiting the church were telling me, “The church is not a warm, friendly church.” We’ve prayed that would change. With all of our hearts, we want this to be a church of brothers and sisters embracing one another in the family of God.

First Samuel 3 is a great passage, “How to Hear the Voice of God.” “The boy Samuel ministered before the LORD under Eli. In those days the word of the LORD was rare; there were not many visions.

One night Eli, whose eyes were becoming so weak that he could barely see, was lying down in his usual place. 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. Then the LORD called Samuel.

Samuel answered, ‘Here I am.’ 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.

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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.’

Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD: The word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him.

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. 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.

The LORD came and stood there, calling as at the other times, ‘Samuel! Samuel!’

Then Samuel said, ‘Speak, for your servant is listening.’

And the LORD said to Samuel, ‘See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make the ears of everyone who hears of it tingle. At that time I will carry out against Eli everything I spoke against his family—from beginning to end. For I told him I would judge his family forever because of the sin he knew about; his sons made themselves contemptible, and he failed to restrain them. Therefore, I swore to the house of Eli, “The guilt of Eli’s house will never be atoned for by sacrifice or offering.”’

Samuel lay down until morning and then opened the doors to the house of the LORD. He was afraid to tell Eli the vision, but Eli called him and said, ‘Samuel, my son.’

Samuel answered, ‘Here I am.’

‘What was it he said to you?’ Eli asked. ‘Do not hide it from me. May God deal with you, be it ever so severely, if you hide from me anything he told you.’ So Samuel told him everything,

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hiding nothing from him. Then Eli said, ‘He is the LORD; let him do what is good in his eyes.’

The LORD was with Samuel as he grew up, and he let none of his words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba recognized that Samuel was attested as a prophet of the LORD.

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.” (1 Samuel 3:1–4:1, NIV).

Briefly, I want to talk to you about five things related to hearing the voice of God—how to hear the voice of God.

#### **I. First, you’ll hear the voice of the Lord if you start to draw near to Him.**

You won’t understand what God wants you to do in life or in ministry unless you begin to draw near to Him. Samuel was drawing near to the Lord. Verse 1, he was ministering before the Lord under Eli. That simply means he was a custodian type in this temple or worship center in Shiloh. He was in a place where he tended lamps and did the manual chores of an assistant priest.

Verse 1 says, “In those days the word of the LORD was rare.” Why was it rare? The word of the Lord is always rare when very few people are ministering to Him. When you get a lot of people ministering to the Lord, suddenly the Lord star-spangles the church with a plenitude of ministries. There is no lack when people are ministering to the Lord. The word of the Lord—the voice of the Lord—is rare when God’s people are not calling upon Him. On the other hand, how do we do that? How do we hear the voice of God? I suggest we spend time on our knees in prayer. I suggest we spend time in the Word—praying, reading, and studying the Word. I suggest we spend time in worship individually and corporately—that is the arena in which the Holy Spirit ministers to us from the inside. And I would suggest we be around God’s people. In being around His people, we will instantly begin to sense where there is a need and how we can give of ourselves toward it. Draw near to the Lord, and He’ll begin showing you what He’s going to do.

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#### **II. Second, on hearing the voice of God, know that God’s voice is not always easily discerned.**

Wouldn’t it be wonderful if God spoke with a megaphone every time we needed to have His direction? I have never heard a direct voice from God. I’ve always gone on indirect means.

Looking at the Bible, I realize that everybody God spoke to directly went through an awful lot of suffering. Maybe that’s why He spoke directly to them— to prepare them, to give them a steady compass.

Even though God spoke directly to Samuel, it was not a clear word—not with a megaphone.

“Samuel! Samuel!” When Samuel heard the voice, he thought it was Eli. The voice of God sounded like the old man’s voice! Every time the voice came, Samuel got up and went to Eli. He thought it was Eli. The voice of God is not always easily discerned.

Interestingly enough, one commentator said that what Samuel had was “an auditory message dream theophany.” Wouldn’t it be great if we all got an “auditory message dream theophany”? Samuel thought it was the voice of Eli. God often speaks to us indirectly. We must be sensitive to pick up when His voice doesn’t seem to be coming through all that clearly.

The president of Southern California College, who founded the Assemblies of God church in Wheaton, Illinois, was talking about a baccalaureate ceremony twenty years ago. This baccalaureate is a big deal. All the parents come—everybody is there—teachers, students, everybody. While everyone was running around in their robes that day, getting ready for the baccalaureate ceremony, there was an old, bum-like guy on campus. He had ratty, holey clothes, and he was not too clean—it sort of looked like he had slept in his clothes. He was going around, trying to strike up a conversation with people. Nobody talked to him. Finally, he goes and sits on the steps of the college chapel. The whole graduating procession from the administration,

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faculty, and students march right by him, while he is sitting there on the steps in his old, disheveled clothes. And the service goes on. Finally, the time comes for the speaker. The president of the college is about to introduce the speaker. People were looking around—where was the speaker? Just as the president finishes introducing him, the back door swings open and down the aisle shuffles his guy in his old, tattered clothes. He steps up to the mic and says, “I was hungry and you fed me not. I was poor and you visited me not. I was naked and you clothed me not. I was in prison and you did not come to me.” Stone silence!

Do we need a direct word from God to do something for the poor? Do we need a direct word from God to help our brothers and sisters in the faith who are suffering? Do we need a direct word from God to do something that counts in ministry? We’ve already got the direct word! Jesus said to do it. We don’t need an auditory message dream theophany. It’s there. Just be sensitive to what God is saying to you.

### **III. Third, responding to the voice of the Lord is not always convenient.**

Responding to the voice of the Lord is hardly ever convenient. He has this habit of calling us at the wrong time. Notice in the text in Samuel that the lamp of God had not yet gone out. You can do mystical and spiritual things with that passage. What it literally means is that inside the Holy Place there was a seven-stick candelabra. It was lit by little lamps of oil that burned all night long. This way, there would always be a sense of presence in the Holy Place. Toward the wee hours of the early morning, it would have burned all night and the oil supply would have been very low. Sometimes those lamps would go out toward the breaking of the dawn. That is the time when the Lord called Samuel—when he was asleep in the early morning hours. God often calls us at inconvenient times.

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Notice Samuel's nonverbal response. His verbal response was, "Here I am." Even later when the Lord calls him, it was "Here I am." His nonverbal response is just as great. He not only says, "Here I am," but he runs! He ran to Eli! He's eager to be of service to the Lord. What an attitude! Instead of having to drag ministry out of him, he's ready to do it. I want to be like that—like the cat who fell into the milk pail and said, "Oh, for a capacity equal to my opportunity!" If you're not involved in a ministry within this body or at all, what an opportunity! Ask God to give you a capacity equal to your opportunity. Samuel says, "Speak Lord. Your servant is listening. I'm ready."

#### **IV. The fourth thing about listening for the voice of God—service for the Lord always changes our relationship to other people.**

If you start serving the Lord, your relationship with other people will dramatically change. See verses 6 and 16. Both occasions Eli, the old priest, calls Samuel "my son." Samuel started out being a student. In the course of Samuel's ministering to the Lord, his relationship to Eli changed. Being in the family of God changes our relationship to one another.

I came to the church like you did. The first time, I was a total stranger. It was new to me. In the course of becoming part of this body, I have met a larger family than my natural family. I thank God for my natural family, but I also thank God for this family—my real brothers and sisters in Christ. God does not call us to be a community of strangers, but to be a real, living, interconnected family—mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters. In my parents' generation, they called everybody "Brother" or "Sister." I'm not so sure that's a bad idea. "Brother" or "Sister" expresses the bond we have in Christ. When you get involved in ministry, you'll find it's going to dramatically affect your relationship with other people. Service to the Lord does change our relationship to other people.

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**V. The last thing I want to say about hearing the voice of God is—when we step out to minister, we must take one step at a time.**

It's incremental. The Lord is talking to Samuel, but He doesn't dump the whole weight of the future on him. He just tells him one thing that's going to happen to Eli. He doesn't say to Samuel, "If I'm going to call you, I might as well lay everything out for you. You're going to become a great prophet of Israel. You're going to unify the nation. You're going to be the last of the judges—the first of the prophets. You're going to anoint two great kings—Saul and David. That's the good. The bad thing is—you're going to have two sons that grow up to be just as bad as Eli's sons."

God knows we're not strong enough to take the good or the bad. If we knew all the good in advance, we'd get a big head. If we knew all the bad, we'd get depressed. I've found sometimes people don't get involved in ministry because they're waiting for something bigger—something better. Jesus kept saying, "Now is the time. Now is the kingdom of God." The worst thing we could say is "later." It's now! Do it now.

Samuel responded immediately to God's will. He does the one thing God told him to do with Eli. Verses 19–21 show us that Samuel grew up, and he became a great man of Israel. His words were like arrows—they were well aimed, and they didn't fall to the ground. His word was established. That only happened because he started out small—ministering where he was. The will of God is not something big, out there in the future. It is today. I encourage you to do whatever you can today—do what is in your power today.

### **Closing Prayer**

Lord, our prayer today, on this day of ministries, is "Send me." Make us more sensitive to You—to Your people, to the world, to Your work, to the opportunities for service that are all around us.

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Each one of us here this morning has potential in Your eyes and even in our own eyes. We pray, Lord Jesus, that all our potential will be developed by the Holy Spirit—that no potential will remain undeveloped because we were unwilling to stretch, to reach out, and extend ourselves in ministry. We know, Lord, You said that You would build Your church and the gates of hell would not prevail against it. We believe, Lord, that Word applies not only with the church universal, but it applies to this local church as well. You build the church. We open ourselves to a new availability for You to build Your work in us and through us. We want to have Your heart for this community. We want to have Your heart for friends, family, and neighbors. We want to be filled with all the power of the Holy Spirit to do Your work. We ask in these coming days and months that as a whole church family, we would—with one heart, one mind, one purpose, one voice, and one action—give ourselves to hearing Your voice, doing Your work, and accomplishing Your will in this world. We seek this, Lord, in Your name. Amen.