

FIVE FORKS BRETHREN IN CHRIST CHURCH

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SERMON: *Samuel*

SERIES: *1 Samuel*

SCRIPTURES: *1 Samuel 3*

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**Credit to Eugene Peterson Commentary; Brazos Commentary; Bible Project (Tim Mackie); John Ortberg*

Well good morning and welcome to Five Forks Church. It is good to worship with you today. Everybody here in the room and also to those of you tuning in on the live stream.

Hey we started this series last week, studying the book of **1 Samuel (Series Graphic)** in your Bible. Stories about the nation of Israel as they transition from a time of being led by Judges to being led by Kings. And in succeeding weeks we'll talk a little bit about the first two kings of Israel. Obviously, there is way more in this book than we can unpack in 6 weeks. So we're just hitting a few of the major characters and events in the book. But one of the key figures in the story is a priest named Samuel and the book is actually named after him. Not because he wrote it, but because he becomes a key figure in the story.

Many folks mistakenly think, Samuel must be the name of the person who wrote the book. The truth is we actually don't know who wrote the book of Samuel. In fact, it's much more likely that the book was put together by multiple authors and editors.

And I said last week, it's fascinating because maybe we go to an ancient history book like Samuel in the Bible and think "Oh boy, we're gonna be studying an Old

Testament history book about ancient Kings. What is this gonna have to do with my life?”

But last week we met Samuel’s mother, Hannah. A story about a woman, who experienced very deep personal pain and shame, because she was not able to have children for the longest time. And we learned about how she walked through that painful experience. And I hope you were able to see how relatable Hannah’s story was. We also experience deep hurt and pain in our lives and we need to know, as followers of Jesus, what does it look like to walk through those experiences.

Eventually Hannah, is able to have a son and at the end of chapter 1 she dedicates her son back to God. She dedicates Samuel to work in God’s house. He is going to go into training to become a priest. And so today, we want to take a look at a little bit of Samuel’s story. So if you have your Bible turn to **1 Samuel 3**.

So...let’s take a look at the beginning of

I. Samuel’s Story

Now before I jump into the story itself. I want to play a little game with you called. **“Name that sound.”** I want to see how good you are at hearing, listening. How in tune your ears are. So, I’m gonna play a sound and I want you to tell me what that sound is. What is it that you are hearing?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U-btSLpuybU>

0:00 – 1:46

Today, as we dive into Samuel’s story, I want to talk a little bit about “hearing God.” Does God communicate with us? Have you ever heard him speaking? What does his voice sound like? Would you recognize it if you heard it? We make important decisions about our lives all the time. Wouldn't it be great if we could hear God talking us through all the choices? Guiding us.

Like if you're dating, wouldn't it be great if you could hear God walking you through the dating process? "No, not that one! Date this one!" Or when you're deciding on a career, if God would be there to say, "Yes take that job. No, don't work there." Or if you get in an argument with your spouse, wouldn't that be a wonderful gift to hear God's voice guiding you? Just when you're about to tell them how much they're like their mother, to hear God say, "No, don't go there. Don't say that. Say this instead." (Ortberg Examples)

Interestingly enough, the Bible teaches over and over again, that God does guide us. When the Israelites were fleeing Egypt and they didn't know where to go...God guided them by a pillar of cloud during the day and a flames of fire at night. Psalm 23 says that "God is our Shepherd and that he will lead us by quiet waters through life." Proverbs says, "Trust in the Lord and lean not on your own understanding and he will make your paths straight." James 1 says, "If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God who give generously..." Scripture teaches us that God is our guide.

But the guidance of God, hearing, discerning God's voice can be one of the most perplexing aspects of life. Maybe you know some people who make "hearing God" sound so simple. "God told me to do this. God spoke to me about going here. God laid this burden on my heart. God showed this amazing truth." But then there are other people, who follow God, who learn about God, love God but who never find themselves having that kind of experience. Maybe you've wondered to yourself, "am I doing something wrong? Is there some kind of hidden secret to this whole guidance thing or are all these people just making this stuff up?"

So that's what our message is about today. Learning to hear and discern God speaking to us. And some really helpful principles or concepts for all of us as we seek to hear God's voice. So **1 Samuel 3...**

The boy Samuel ministered before the LORD under Eli. (So Eli, is like the head priest at the time.) 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 house of the LORD, where the ark of God was.

⁴ Then the LORD called Samuel. (God spoke, God communicated with 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. (We’ll come back to that in a few minutes.)

⁸ A third time the LORD called, “Samuel!” 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.”

Ok, so I know, just a short little episode in Samuel’s life, but let’s see what this story teaches us about learning to hear God’s voice in our lives. Some very helpful principles here for all of us. First, notice that...

A. Hearing God is not always simple.

In the story, Samuel had to learn to recognize God’s voice. Three times God speaks to Samuel and Samuel strikes out. He is unaware that it is God that is speaking to him. All three times, he actually thinks it’s someone else, he thinks it’s Eli that is speaking to him.

What this means is that it’s possible for God to speak to someone, but that person doesn’t know it’s actually God speaking...hearing God is not always simple.

Part of the reason, it’s not always simple to recognize God’s voice, is because as human beings, most of our **communication** with each other is very **direct**...we use audible voices or words on a page or in some cases physical gestures/motions.

But Dallas Willard says, that communication at it’s core is simply **guiding someone else’s thoughts**. Causing someone to think things they wouldn’t otherwise be thinking. Because we’re finite creatures we have to use very direct and finite means in order to do this...like audible voices or words on a page or physical gestures/motions.

For example, I’m up here communicating to you all this morning using my audible voice. It’s pretty clear and direct. You know I’m speaking to you. And because you’re sitting here listening to what I’m saying, I’m guiding your thoughts. You’re thinking things you wouldn’t otherwise be thinking...like, most of you right now are thinking “when is this sermon gonna be over.” But it’s clear and direct.

But God is unlimited. And so God is able to communicate with us **indirectly**. In other words, God is able to guide our thoughts without using an audible voice or words on a page. Scholars debate whether God spoke to Samuel using an audible voice or whether he was guiding Samuel's thoughts.

Often God's Spirit will prompt us with ideas or thoughts, even though we don't hear anything audible or direct.

Just the other day, I was in my office working and I was working through my sermon on Hannah. And just thinking through the deep pain she was experiencing and a family that I know, popped into my mind that had experienced some really hard life circumstances and then the next thought that came into my head, *"You know, Shaun, you should send them an email and just let them know you were thinking about them and send them a note of encouragement."* So I did and I had just a really encouraging conversation with them.

Now, I don't know for certain that that was God that put that thought into my mind, I didn't hear any audible voice, but I trust that God can and does work like that.

One of the things that helps in hearing God's voice, even though it may not be audible is **Scripture**. God's direction in our lives won't go against the teachings of Scripture. When you start wondering, is this from God? Part of what helps is, is this thought, idea, action in line with what God teaches in Scripture.

The other night, I went down to check on my kids when they were in bed, just to make sure everyone was in bed ok. And I just kind of paused in that moment to look at them as they lay there. And they just looked so little and tender and peaceful and my heart was filled up with love for them. And when they were laying there like that I couldn't imagine how I could ever be mad at them...when they're awake I can definitely imagine, but when they are sleeping so peacefully like that. Then the next

thought that came into my mind was, *“Shaun that sense of love that you have in this moment for your kids, that’s exactly how I feel about you. I look at you when you are asleep and my heart is filled with love. When you’re awake that’s a different story...”* I’m just kidding.

Again, I don’t know for certain that that was God telling me he loved me, in that moment. But it is in line with what Scripture teaches us...For God so loved the world...

God is able to communicate, guide our thoughts, even in indirect ways.

Something like that may be what’s happening for Samuel. He senses, or knows someone is communicating with him, guiding his thoughts but he doesn’t yet recognize that as God’s voice. Maybe God is speaking to you more often than you realize, but maybe you aren’t recognizing His voice yet. Hearing God’s voice is not always simple and we have to learn how to do it.

Second, when it comes to hearing God’s voice...it can be helpful to...

B. Start with silence.

We see this principle at work in Samuel’s story.

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 house of the LORD, where the ark of God was.

⁴ Then the LORD called Samuel.

In the story, we are told that Samuel was lying down, in the house of God and an important little detail...that **the lamp of God (PIC)** had not yet gone out.

In God's house, there was an oil lamp that burned. It needed to be refilled with oil to keep burning. At night, when everyone was asleep, the oil would burn out completely and the lamp would go out. So, we are intended to picture this story taking place in the quiet of night, perhaps the middle of the night, perhaps the very early morning before anyone was getting up for the day.

And it is in that quiet, as Samuel lay, no distractions in front of his face. No work to be done. Simply laying still...and in that stillness...he heard God's voice.

And it's amazing how often this idea of hearing God in the still and quiet is a theme we find throughout Scripture.

Psalm 46 is one of the more prominent examples of this...**Be still and know that I am God.**

Notice it simply says BE...not do and in your "Being still" you know God. You become present with God. It doesn't say "first pick up your Bible." It doesn't say "first listen to worship music." It doesn't say "volunteer for a ministry." All of those things can also be helpful in discerning God's voice, but in this passage it says first just be still and focus your attention on God.

Jesus understood this as well...

Mark 1:35 - Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.

Many great spiritual teachers then picked up on this idea...

Saint John of the Cross once stated, "**Silence is God's first language.**"

Henri Nouen has said, **“Without solitude it is virtually impossible to live a spiritual life...We do not take the spiritual life seriously if we do not set aside some time to be with God and listen to him.”**

"Stillness is always a prerequisite for receptivity." (Ortberg, Love Beyond Reason)

Now, I do just want to clarify, I don't think the principle is...that we need to find silence very early in the morning or in the middle of the night. I don't think the time of day is the most important thing...I really think what matters is eliminating distractions from our attention.

And Dallas Willard kind of fleshes this idea out a little bit more...

To be in silence is to choose to do nothing. For extensive periods of time. All accomplishment is given up. We stop making demands on God. It is enough that God is God and we are his. We learn we have a soul, that God is here, that this world is "my Father's world". (WILLARD/Barton pg 13)

No listening to a podcast. No TV. No toddler screaming demands. No unloading dishes. No folding laundry. No organizing, fixing, cooking, tweeting, Facebooking, instagramming, googling...

Stillness and silence in our world are often viewed as awkward and uncomfortable, even lazy. In our world, you should be engaged in some kind of work or entertainment. Perhaps the reason many of us don't hear God's voice in our lives is because we are too busy, too distracted to listen for His voice. Start with silence.

Third, part of hearing God's voice is understanding that

C. God can speak to anyone.

Many of us still tend to believe that God probably communicates mostly with professionals/experts.

If you really want to hear God, find a Pastor or a missionary or a prophet, right? I chuckle sometimes when I go to various events or activities they need someone to pray. They almost always say, "Shaun, you're a Pastor, you can pray for us." And don't get me wrong, I don't mind praying at all. And I know that I feel comfortable doing it, in a way that others don't. But I do wonder if sometimes, people realize the message it sends... "Pastors, they're the one's who communicate with God."

Samuel's story blows up that concept. For one, verse one says that Samuel is still a boy, it means a child, many scholars believe he could be middle school age. And look at verse 7...**he did not yet know the Lord.** It basically means he was still young in his faith. He still had a lot to learn. He didn't have a theology degree or years of experience. God can speak to anyone.

There's a great story in your Bible that further highlights this idea. Anyone heard of the name **Balaam**, before? Fascinating story, He was a prophet of God. The enemy of Israel, Midian, wanted to use Balaam to prophesy against Israel. So Midian summoned Balaam. Balaam is riding a donkey to go to Midian. God sends an angel to turn Balaam back to Israel. On the road, the donkey sees the angel of God blocking their path. Balaam (the prophet) doesn't see the angel. So the donkey turns aside. Balaam beats the donkey to get her back on the road. This happens three times.

This is from **Numbers 22**:

Then the Lord opened the donkey's mouth, and she said to Balaam, "What have I done to you to make you beat me three times?" Balaam answered the donkey, "You have made a fool of me. If I had a sword in my hand, I would kill you right now." The donkey said to Balaam, "Am I not your own donkey, which you have always ridden, to this day? Have I been in the habit of doing this to you?" "No," he said.

And so there's this conversation taking place between Balaam and his donkey...and it's the donkey that is aware of the angel's presence and is the one communicating "God's guidance" to Balaam. The point is, God is speaking through a donkey. God can speak through anybody he chooses. It's not about spiritual greatness and maturity. God can speak to a little boy, who did not yet know the Lord. He can speak to whomever he wants to.

Maybe you have wondered to yourself, how much do I have know, how mature of a believer do I have to be in order for God to speak to me? The answer in Scripture is, you don't. God can speak to anyone.

Fourth,

D. "God's voice" should not be used to manipulate other people.

Now, this concept doesn't come directly out of our passage today, but I do think it's crucial any time we are talking about hearing God's voice and guidance. We should never use the phrase "God told me..." as a trump card, in order to get other people to do what we want them to do.

All too often churches and church people, use this little phrase as a way to manipulate situations.

One pastor tells the story about being at a worship planning team meeting, and the worship leader had come in with a plan for a service. But was not a good order of service, and it wasn't going to work. So the planning team, we told him that. His response was, "But the Lord gave me this worship order." It wasn't, "Let's talk about the pros and cons of it and get wisdom and see if it would work." He said, "The Lord gave me this." We said, "No, the Lord does much better work than that. If God had really come up with the idea it would be much better than that." The point is we should never use, "God told me" in order to manipulate situations for our benefit.

God told me you're supposed to volunteer at Vacation Bible Camp. God told me you should teach Sunday school. God told me...

As a general rule, if you think an idea came from God, if you hope and pray, listen, get wise counsel, and believe an idea came from God, don't tell other people that to get them to do what you want them to do. As a general rule, if an idea really is from God, it will be a good idea. The goodness of the idea alone will often be enough to convince other people. You don't have to try to hype it up.

(John Ortberg)

And this is why as another general rule of thumb when it comes to discerning God's voice...

E. God's guidance is often best discerned in community.

Did you pick up on this in the story...part of coming to recognize God's voice and guidance for Samuel was through the help of Eli.

Verse 8, **Then Eli realized that the LORD was calling the boy.**

We are part of the Brethren in Christ Church, BIC for short. And the Brethren in Christ have a list of **10 core values**. 10 key identity markers regarding our understanding of faith. And one of those core values is related to the importance of community: **Belonging to the community of faith: We value integrity in relationships and mutual accountability in an atmosphere of grace, love and acceptance.**

The idea is that our Christian faith is not simply an individual experience. You'll hear a lot of Christians talk about their personal relationship with Jesus. That's an important ingredient. But it's only a piece. Following Jesus isn't just about you and your personal relationship with Jesus. In fact, there are a lot of people today who are saying they follow Jesus they just aren't interested in church. And while the nature

of churches may change, following Jesus in essence includes belonging to a community.

Because we tend to think of our faith as an individual experience, it's easy for us to say, "God told me this..."

Part of the reason the community of faith is so important, is because God's guidance, hearing his direction is often best discerned in community. There's a great example of this concept at play in Acts 13.

¹ Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen and Saul. ² While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said (communicated/guided their thoughts), "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." ³ So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.

How did God speak...to and through the community of faith.

If I think God is "communicating" with me, the best thing to do is to share that with some other trusted followers of Jesus. And see if they are hearing that also. It becomes dangerous when I think that I am the only one hearing God's leading voice?

And then finally,

F. Listening should result in obedience.

As we begin walking through this process of hearing and discerning God's voice, it's important to realize that just listening to God's voice is never the end goal. The point of hearing God's voice, is that we are able to act in obedience to Jesus. We see this at the end of Samuel's encounter with God.

Then Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

And don't misunderstand what Samuel is saying. In ancient Hebrew culture, listening meant...hearing and obeying. They were tied together. To listen means to obey. If I tell my kids to brush their teeth before bed and they say, Ok. But then they just continue to sit on the couch. They have not listened. Samuel was in essence saying, "Tell me what you would like me to do God. Speak so that I may do what you tell me to do."

Maybe you've felt this listening to a sermon or teaching. You sit here and listen and you think, "Yeah, I should do that." But somehow when you leave, you never get around to putting it into practice. Sometimes we hear, but we don't always follow through and do.

When Jesus came to the end of his own sermon, the sermon on the mount, Jesus reiterated this very concept. He said, **"Whoever hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise person..."** It is never just enough for us to hear Jesus words, to hear God's voice...the intention is always that we hear, understand and then obey.

And so perhaps the challenge for you this morning, is not so much, hearing Jesus speak...perhaps you have heard, you have the sense that Jesus is communicating in your life, but now, you need to obey. You need to put what you're hearing into practice.