

HEARING GOD'S VOICE

1 Samuel 3

A boy named Colton Burpo from rural northeastern Nebraska was rushed to a hospital during a family trip to Colorado. The doctor diagnosed his problem as a flu. But later he was rushed to a bigger hospital where the diagnosis was a ruptured appendix. The surgeon estimated that it had been ruptured for five days. Four months later when they drive by the hospital Colton's father joked to him about going back there. The boy replied, "You know, Dad, the angels sang to me there." The boy told his father about meeting his great-grandfather. He said the great-grandfather didn't look like the guy in the family picture at home, but like the picture of the man as a youth his daughter sent later to Colton's family. But even more shocking was how Colton talked about his sister who had been miscarried. His parents have never told the 4-year-old boy about her.

The boy's stories led people to encourage his father, Todd, who is a pastor, to write them down. The father was reluctant, until a publisher called him. Colton's stories of heaven are found in the book Heaven Is For Real which has sold over one million copies.

Colton's stories are not isolated. You can go online and find a whole site dedicated to "Near-Death Experiences" (NDE's), listing people who claim to have experienced them and their stories.

Why does this attract us? Because there are people who tell us of heaven! This seems to confirm to us that heaven is real!

Samuel seems to have had that experience in our Old Testament lesson. He is sleeping in tabernacle. Before Solomon built the temple, the center of worship to God in the Old Testament is in a "portable" temple, a tent called the "tabernacle." Samuel is living with the priest Eli, who cared for the tabernacle. A voice calls Samuel by name. Samuel thinks it is Eli talking to him. But when he goes to Eli, Eli tells him it was not him and to go back to bed. Again Samuel hears the voice call him by name. Again, he goes to Eli who again tells him to go back to bed. When all of this happens a third time, Eli realizes it must be God. He tells Samuel to go back and when he hears the voice to say, "Speak, LORD, for your servant hears." Samuel goes back to hear God!

Now what would it be like for that to happen to you and me?

Charles Austin Miles wrote the famous hymn, "In the Garden." The hymn tells about going to a garden to pray to God. Then God talks to the person in the garden. It is described as such a wonderful experience!

But where does that leave you and me? What is so dominant about all those stories from the "NDEs" or people seeing visions of heaven is that they so focus on going to heaven that they tell me that "I can go to heaven." "I can have happiness." It is so centered on me. Heaven is not just a Christian concept. The word "paradise" is Iranian and comes from the pagan view of paradise before Christianity. Moslem fanatics dream of being martyred as suicide bombers so they can go to a paradise filled with young virgins for them. If that is what these visions are all about, is this really God talking?

The book of first Samuel introduces the story of Samuel hearing God's voice by saying "the word of the LORD was rare in those days." Why? Wasn't God speaking? Samuel lived during the time of the Judges. God had spoken to His people Israel through His prophets Moses and Joshua. But when they settled into the Promised Land, they forgot what Moses and Joshua had taught them about not getting mixed up in the paganism of the world around them. The result was that they forgot to worship God and worshipped idols. God would then allow other nations to afflict them. Then they called to God for help. God would send judges—better translated "saviors" to rescue them. But then they would forget God again. They told God the problem was that they didn't have a king like other nations had. It wasn't good enough for them to have God as their king. No wonder God's Word was so rare. People weren't listening.

When Adam and Eve committed the first sin and heard the sound of God walking in the Garden of Eden, what did they do? They hid. They didn't want to hear Him.

Do we hear Him today? Do we want to? Do we want to when God tells us not to do something and we do it anyway? Sexual relation are for within

a marriage between a man and a woman, copying from someone else is cheating, lying is lying, the body is to be cared for, not abused. Do we want to hear Him when He tells us to do something and we'd rather not? "Forgive those who sin against you." "Let your light so shine before me that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven." "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and give to God, what is God's." Like husbands we suffer from selective hearing. We tune out so much of what God says that it is a wonder that we hear anything.

But Samuel did hear God. Why? Samuel came to the tabernacle because his mother, Hannah, had promised to give him in service to God. Hannah was not able to bear children until God blessed her in a special way. In gratefulness to God, she gave Samuel to serve God in the tabernacle. Samuel was raised to know God, to not be polluted by the paganism that so many of the Israelites had fallen into. It is hard to hear when so many voices are talking to you at once. Samuel wasn't distracted by those other voices. He could hear God.

But also Samuel went to Eli. Why? Because Eli was God's priest. And Eli was now his guardian and parent. Samuel went to where he knew he'd get God's direction—from the authority God had put over him.

And Samuel heard God because he was open to Him. Eli gave him the instruction when he heard a voice to say, "Speak, LORD, for your servant hears,"

We can hear God as we "turn down" the other voices around us. Samuel found God in the tabernacle because that's where God told His people He was. He tells us that we find Him today in His Word, Baptism, Holy Communion, and in the fellowship we have with other Christians. This is where we can hear God.

And as Samuel went to the authority God put over him, we can too. If your parents are Christian, that's always a starting place. When groups tell people to not listen to the parents and authorities God put over them, alarm bells should go off in your heads. They are probably actually pulling us away from God. We should go to our "Elis," parents, pastors, and what Christians have said through the centuries over the test of time.

Those direct us to listen to God, not what we might like to be God.

Then we can be open to hearing God. What Samuel heard wasn't all "heaven and wonderful." He heard that God would punish Israel. Eli would be killed because he did not discipline his wicked sons. Listening means that we are open to what God says, not just what we want to hear.

And He does speak. Not in a garden. Not in near-death experiences. I am not saying that those people, like Colton, didn't hear God. But we also know that when people go unconscious they can see all kinds of things. How much clearer it is to hear how God speaks to us today—Jesus in our Gospel telling us that He is the Messiah. You want to hear God? Listen to Jesus. See what He did on the cross and empty tomb. Jesus told His disciples, "What the prophets longed to see, you now see and hear." And to those disciples He said, "Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet believe." He's talking there about you and me. Maybe we don't see Jesus face-to-face like the disciples. Maybe we don't hear His voice as Samuel did on the tabernacle. But we have something better—His Word.—His Gospel.

St. Peter, writing about the Transfiguration when Jesus appeared with Moses and Elijah, said, "We have something more certain, the Word of God." If Peter had to choose between the Scriptures and his experiences, he'd have chosen the Scriptures hands down. Why? Because they are so certain, so clear, so open to all of us.

People will always be attracted to something else, because we so often want things our way, not God's. But I can guarantee you that what we have in Scriptures, in our joining with other Christians, in Baptism and Holy Communion is so much better than any vision or experience. So with Samuel to turn to how God does talk to us and say, "Speak, LORD, for your servant hears!"

Sermon delivered by Pastor Mark T. Heilman
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