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## SERMON OUTLINE

# Samuel: Are you listening?

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 **'The Lord came and stood there, calling as at the other times, "Samuel! Samuel!" Then Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."' (1 Samuel 3:10 NIV)**

## Introduction

We've all been there. It starts out as a perfectly normal conversation: two people sharing some news, chatting about the price of milk, or a discussion about the officer's sermon on Sunday. And then it happens. Maybe it happens to the person who was talking at that moment. Or in the worst scenario, it's the person listening. It starts with a brief bodily twitch, then a sudden movement of their hand towards their pocket. Their eye contact lingers for a few more seconds, as the hand fishes for something in the pocket. And then BAM!... the mobile phone is out. The eye contact is broken and YES, that brief vibration in their pocket WAS a notification. A text message was received. The talker continues to talk, but the tempo has changed. The meaningful dialogue about 'semi-skimmed' versus 'full fat' is now a one-way monologue. The talker continues for a little while, convinced that if they slow their talking pace a little, the words might somehow penetrate through the distraction. The listener, now a mere attendee to the conversation, taps away at their device, convinced that their 'uh-huh' and 'mmm' sounds will be enough to prove to the other person that they are totally engaged in the conversation. Then there's the awkward moment when the talker stops. The 'listener' realises that there is now a silence, where once there were words. Did they ask me a question? Have they been offended? What should I say? 'Don't worry, I was listening. I can multi-task. Carry on!'

This scenario is far more common than most of us would like to admit, and many of us have probably found ourselves on both sides of the problem. Without wishing to start a debate on the perils of modern technology and social etiquette, there is a deeper need in our world for active listening. Active listeners are focused on the speaker, engaged with the conversation and understand the implications. The alternatives are 'not listening', where we choose to ignore what is said, or 'passive listening', where the sounds and words are heard, but aren't really absorbed or understood.

## Samuel and Eli

The art of listening is at the heart of the story of Samuel's first conversation with the Lord. The text of 1 Samuel 3 begins with the statement that 'the word of the Lord was rare; there were not many visions'. It is quite possible that the expectation of hearing from God had faded, and in its place the rituals and duties of the Temple had taken priority.

The boy Samuel is having a rest from his Temple duties when he hears a voice. In his state of tiredness, confusion and naivety, he assumes his master Eli has summoned him from his nap and needs attention. Obediently, he goes straight to Eli to await instruction. However, Eli assures Samuel that he did not call for him and sends him back to bed. This happens a second time, and then a third time, at which point Eli realises that the boy is hearing the voice of the Lord. The text shows no hesitation in Eli's advice to Samuel; but it would be easy to imagine how Eli may have felt when he realised that the Lord had chosen the boy Samuel to hear his voice and overlooked the priest Eli. In the previous chapter, Eli had been warned by a prophet that his priestly authority would soon be cut short. Undoubtedly Eli would have understood the prophetic significance of this moment, both for himself and for Samuel. Regardless of his own feelings, he instructs Samuel to acknowledge the Lord when he hears the voice again.

By the fourth call, Samuel is ready to listen. His response, as instructed by Eli, shows that he is aware of his own place in relation to the voice he hears ('Your servant is listening'). However, there may be some significance in the fact that he omits one word from Eli's instructions. Eli had instructed Samuel to reply with 'Speak, Lord, your servant is listening', but Samuel's reply omits the word 'Lord'. It is possible that Samuel doubted that this voice could really be the Lord speaking to him, a mere boy. Or perhaps there is no real significance to this omission. In any case, Samuel finds himself in a conversation with the Lord.

He has heard and understood the guidance of his mentor, and now he awaits the guidance and instruction of the Lord. The situation he finds himself in is the result of listening to Eli's brief instructions moments earlier; but his obedience to Eli may also be credited to the years of mentoring that had previously taken place. If Samuel hadn't learned to engage with and trust Eli over the years, then Eli's advice may have been ignored.

Sadly, not everyone in this world has a mentor, coach or leader that they can turn to for wisdom and advice. There is a real need for Godly people to engage with one another in mutual support, so that a culture of active listening develops – not just in our day-to-day conversations with one another (though that would be a good start!), but also in our dialogue with God.

In the 21st Century we could be led to think, as in the Bible text, that 'the word of the Lord is rare; and there are not many visions' (verse 1). However, God has not given up speaking to his people. It may just be that many of us haven't learned how to recognise his voice, nor how to respond when we do. Often we yearn for the loud, clear, discernible voice of God, as in Deuteronomy 5:22, where 'the Lord proclaimed in a loud voice to [the] whole assembly there on the mountain from out of the fire...'. Such a vivid interaction with the Lord would probably be most people's preference (perhaps without the fire!); but the reality is that there are seasons of silence, and times of gentle whispering in God's interactions with his people. It may take three or four, or even one hundred attempts for God to get a single message across to us. In those times, we may need to turn to the wisdom and counsel of trusted friends or mentors to help us to discern the voice of the Lord. Not only can a trusted mentor offer sound advice on listening, but they may even turn out to be God's chosen method of delivering his message. Many people can testify to moments when waiting for God's voice, they have heard his words spoken through trusted friends. Furthermore, there are just as many instances when God has spoken through the least likely source. Trusted friends can be a wise place to seek advice, but God could equally choose the next person to walk into your classroom, workplace, or doctor's waiting room.

Despite Eli's many failings, he was still adequately qualified to direct Samuel to the voice of the Lord. (After all, when Samuel heard the voice of God he thought he recognised it as the voice of Eli.) We don't need to seek out the perfect person to be our mentor, but someone we trust, who knows God and knows us, is often a good place to start.

### The challenge

Samuel's interactions with both Eli and the Lord provide a good example of obedience and listening, but there is far more to active listening than merely hearing the words spoken and nodding enthusiastically throughout. True active listening requires an appropriate response to what has been heard.

**📖 'And the Lord said to Samuel: "See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make the ears of everyone who hears about it tingle."' (v11)**

You can imagine that Samuel's momentary excitement at recognising the Lord's voice is rapidly replaced by a sinking feeling of dread, as the Lord continues with his message:

**📖 'At that time I will carry out against Eli everything I spoke against his family – from beginning to end. For I told him that I would judge his family for ever because of the sin he knew about; his**

**sons uttered blasphemies against God, 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.” (vv12–14)**

If we tune our ears and hearts to what God is truly saying to us, we need to brace ourselves for the very real fact that we might not enjoy everything he says. There are times when God needs to cut through the nonsense and talk straight. Whilst God is the ultimate joy-bringer and peace-giver, he rarely leaves things undisturbed when he addresses his people. He calls some to leave their homes and take on a new path (like Abraham). He calls some to go to declare an uncomfortable message to people who may not want to hear it (like Jonah, Esther, Joseph, and Moses – and eventually Samuel too). He instructs some to live a lifestyle that contradicts the lifestyle of those around them (like Noah, and Daniel). He dares some to stand up to forces that seem impossible to defeat (like Joshua and David). Furthermore, a brief look at the first disciples of Jesus would reveal how a similar pattern of challenge and disruption also applied to them: called to leave their homes, to declare an uncomfortable message to people who may not want to hear it, to live in stark contrast to the world around them, and to stand up to opposing forces. This is the repeated call of God to his people – past, present and future. A dialogue with the Almighty is not always a comfortable chat!

## The response

There is so much we can take away from this brief story in Samuel's life. A good starting point would be to adopt a posture of active listening in our interactions with one another. Distractions are plentiful, and it may only take a simple text message to divert us away from an opportunity to hear God's words in a conversation with another person. Furthermore, we may miss the opportunity to be God's spokesperson in the life of a friend, colleague or neighbour.

On another level, we may be challenged to find a mentor, or one or two trusted friends to spend regular time with, in meaningful, God-centred dialogue. However, many of us place such a high importance on the role of the mentor that we never find someone perfect enough to bestow that title on. Perhaps we should place a higher importance on trust than on perfection, so that we might widen our search a little!

And finally, we need to brace ourselves for what God may choose to say to us, when we are willing to listen and respond. It may be disruptive but that doesn't mean it is a thing to fear. The call of God is not to eliminate chaos, loss, challenges and brokenness, but to live with peace amidst chaos, freedom in our sacrifices, fullness in our challenges, and beauty in our brokenness.

How much more might we hear from God if our conversations, prayer times and moments of reading the word adopt a posture of active listening that says: 'Speak, Lord, your servant is listening.' We can be sure that whatever challenge he lays before us, his grace and love are more than sufficient.

*Master, speak: thy servant heareth,  
Waiting for thy gracious word,  
Longing for thy voice that cheereth;  
Master, let it now be heard.  
I am listening, Lord, for thee;  
What hast thou to say to me?*

*Speak to me by name, O Master,  
Let me know it is to me.  
Speak, that I may follow faster,  
With a step more firm and free,  
Where the shepherd leads the flock  
In the shadow of the rock.*

*Master, speak: though least and lowest,  
Let me not unheard depart.  
Master, speak! for O thou knowest  
All the yearning of my heart,  
Knowest all its truest need;  
Speak! and make me blest indeed.*

*Master, speak: and make me ready,  
When thy voice is truly heard,  
With obedience glad and steady  
Still to follow every word.  
I am listening, Lord, for thee;  
Master, speak: O speak to me!*

Frances Ridley Havergal, 1867, SASB 775