

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Lessons from the life of Samuel: His parents and his call to serve (1 Samuel 1:1-3:21)

Today we begin a series of talks about the life of Samuel. This morning it's about his childhood, especially the well-known story of how God spoke directly to him one night (1 Samuel 3:1-18). Samuel's response: "Speak, LORD, for Your servant hears" (1 Samuel 3:9-10), has inspired several Christian hymn writers. We'll use one of these hymns, by Frances Ridley Havergal, as an opening prayer:

Lord, speak to me, that I may speak
In living echoes of Thy tone;
As Thou hast sought, so let me seek
Thy erring children lost and lone.

O lead me, Lord, that I may lead
The wandering and the wavering feet;
O feed me, Lord, that I may feed
Thy hungry ones with manna sweet.

O strengthen me, that while I stand
Firm on the Rock, and strong in Thee
I may stretch out a loving hand
To wrestlers with the troubled sea.

O teach me, Lord, that I may teach
The precious things Thou dost impart;
And wing my words that they may reach
The hidden depths of many a heart.

O give Thine own sweet rest to me,
That I may speak with soothing power
A word in season, as from Thee,
To weary ones in needful hour.

O fill me with Thy fullness, Lord,
Until my very heart o'erflow
In kindling thought and glowing word,
Thy love to tell, Thy praise to show.

O use me, Lord, use even me,
Just as Thou wilt, and when, and where;
Until Thy blessed face I see,
Thy rest, Thy joy, Thy glory share.

Amen.

Samuel's Parent's

1 Samuel commences with the story of Samuel's parents (1 Samuel 1:1-7), particularly that Hannah, his mother, was childless (1 Samuel 1:2-6). They lived towards the end of the Judges period, when things were spiritually very low in Israel's history, "*In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes*", Judges 21:25. Even though Samuel's father, Elkanah, had children by his other wife, Peninnah (1 Samuel 1:2), he may have thought that Hannah's barrenness had something to do with God's judgement upon His people at that time. To make matters worse for Hannah, Peninnah severely provoked her about it, especially at Shiloh during the yearly family worship times at the house of the LORD (1 Samuel 1:7). However, Hannah couldn't conceive "*because the LORD had*

closed her womb", 1 Samuel 1:6. So she became spiritually exercised about it. Nowadays there may be medical explanations why some Christian couples are infertile, but they must, like Hannah, look beyond natural causes to seek God's help for this difficult, and sometimes embarrassing, problem of married life.

Hannah was so concerned that she wept instead of being joyful in God's presence, and she held back from participating in the family fellowship offerings (1 Samuel 1:8). Her behaviour drew out Elkanah's love for her. He compensated her with double portions of the offerings, but she wouldn't eat (1 Samuel 1:5). Then he expressed his care and concern for her spiritual and physical well-being, "*Hannah, why are you weeping? Why don't you eat? And why are you downhearted? Don't I mean more to you than ten sons?*" 1 Samuel 1:8 (New International Version). Infertility can cause friction between couples, and it requires much patience and understanding, the one partner for the other. Like Hannah and Elkanah, such couples will find a ready resource in God!

Hannah at the Tabernacle

Therefore Hannah, in bitterness of soul, went into the tabernacle, which was the house of the LORD in those times (1 Samuel 1:9). She prayed this vow: "*O LORD of hosts, if You will indeed look on the affliction of Your maidservant and remember me, and not forget Your maidservant, but will give your maidservant a male child, then I will give him to the LORD all the days of his life, and no razor shall come upon his head*", 1 Samuel 1:11. Initially, because only her lips moved as she spoke in her heart, Eli the priest thought she was drunk, 1 Samuel 1:12-16. But, after she had cleared up the misunderstanding, she received Eli's blessing: "*Go in peace, and the God of Israel grant your petition which you have asked of Him*", 1 Samuel 1:17. In faith she acted upon it. "*So [she] went her way and ate, and her face was no longer sad ... the LORD remembered her. So it came to pass in the process of time that Hannah conceived and bore a son, and called his name Samuel, saying, 'Because I have asked for him from the LORD'*", 1 Samuel 1:18-21.

Baby Samuel

The sequel to the story is very lovely. Hannah remained true to her vow. She stayed at home each year with baby Samuel in the mountains of Ephraim whilst her family went up to Shiloh for the yearly sacrifice (1 Samuel 1:22-23). When he was weaned, she rejoined the annual pilgrimage and brought her offerings to the house of the LORD (1 Samuel 1:24). She then fulfilled her vow and presented her precious son to Eli: "*For this child I prayed, and the LORD has granted me my petition which I asked of Him. Therefore I also have [returned] him to the LORD; as long as he lives he shall be lent to the LORD*", 1 Samuel 1:27-28. Later on, Eli further blessed Elkanah and Hannah, "*The LORD give you descendants ... for the loan that was given to [Him]*", 1 Samuel 2:20. Their faithfulness was rewarded and they had a further three sons and two daughters, 1 Samuel 2:21. At the end of Samuel's dedication service, Elkanah, Hannah and Samuel "*worshipped the LORD*", 1 Samuel 1:28.

Hannah's prayer

Elkanah had said to Hannah that they should allow the LORD to achieve His will with respect to Samuel, 1 Samuel 1:23. This will is described for us in Hannah's prayer, 1 Samuel 2:1-10, which celebrates how the LORD would deal with the nation of Israel.

"My heart rejoices in the LORD; My horn is exalted in the LORD. I smile at my enemies, Because I rejoice in Your salvation. No one is holy like the LORD, For there is none beside You, Nor is there any rock like our God. Talk no more so very proudly; Let no arrogance come from your mouth, For the LORD is the God of knowledge; And by His actions are weighed. The bows of the mighty men are broken, And those who stumbled are girded with strength. Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, and the hungry have ceased to hunger, Even the barren has borne seven, And she who has many children has become feeble. The LORD kills and makes alive; He brings down to the grave and brings up. The LORD makes poor and makes rich: He brings low and lifts up. He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the beggar from the ash heap, to set them among princes And make them inherit the throne of glory. For the pillars of the earth are the LORD'S, and He has set the world upon them. He will guard the feet of His saints, But the wicked shall be silent in darkness. For by strength no man shall prevail. The adversaries of the LORD shall be broken in pieces; From heaven He will thunder against them. The LORD will judge the ends of the earth. He will give strength to His king and exalt the horn of His anointed" (1 Samuel 2:1-10)

Remarkably, this prayer contains very little about Hannah's personal needs which had been realised in the gift of her son. But it does explain how God would eventually use Samuel for His own purposes in exalting His anointed, David the king (see 1 Samuel 16:13). To do this He required Samuel to be a holy person, one who was separated to Him from birth. Hannah had committed Samuel to such a life (1 Samuel 1:11).

Prophetically her prayer extended far beyond David's reign, or the narrow bounds of Israel's kingdom under him, to future times when "*the kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever!*" Revelation 11:15. But in passing we should notice how Hannah rejoices in the LORD, (1

Samuel 2:1) then speaks about His holiness, omniscience, sovereignty, omnipotence, creatorial power, faithfulness, justice and intelligence in addition to His salvation, judgement and kingdom.

Parental Responsibilities

Naturally speaking, Elkanah and Hannah took a huge risk in leaving the young boy Samuel behind at Shiloh in the care of Eli (1 Samuel 2:11). Not only were there many emotional issues for him to contend with, but there were many physical and spiritual dangers. *“Eli’s sons were wicked men; they had no regard for the LORD”*, 1 Samuel 2:12 (New International Version). But Samuel’s parents were convinced that God had plans for him. They knew that, as a young Levite, he was already entering into God’s service, *“...the child ministered to the LORD before Eli the priest”*, 1 Samuel 2:11. However, Elkanah and Hannah didn’t neglect their parental responsibilities. *“Moreover his mother used to make him a little [linen ephod], and bring it to him year by year when she came up with her husband to offer the yearly sacrifice”*, 1 Samuel 2:19. Despite the adverse environment at Shiloh, Samuel’s parents continued to exert a godly influence on his young life.

Eli’s family

By contrast, Eli didn’t have much control over his two sons, Hophni and Phinehas (1 Samuel 2:12-17). They profaned the things of the LORD to satisfy their carnal appetites. Also, Eli himself was under their influence. He was compromised by gluttony in that he had become fat by eating the best of the offerings they forcibly took from the people. Together they robbed both God and the people of the animal sacrifices (1 Samuel 2:15). Eli’s sons committed immorality with the women who met at the door of the tabernacle. Such was the corruption and immorality of Hophni and Phinehas that *“[their] sin was very great before the LORD, for men abhorred the offering of the LORD”*, 1 Samuel 2:17.

Christian parents should follow the godly example of Elkanah and Hannah. They should seek God’s help to guide their children aright and ask for the grace of God to keep them from evil. Today’s world is just as unclean as it was in Shiloh during Samuel’s childhood, and there is much corruption in Christendom. This Old Testament family’s experience shows that God has power to guard and to protect.

1 Samuel 2 contrasts Samuel’s innocence with the sin of Eli’s sons:

- *“But Samuel ministered before the LORD, even as a child, wearing a linen ephod”*, 1 Samuel 2:18
- *“Meanwhile the child Samuel grew before the LORD”*, 1 Samuel 2:21
- *“And the child Samuel grew in stature, and in favour both with the LORD and men”*, 1 Samuel 2:26. (These things are also said about the Lord Jesus Christ in Luke 2:40, 52.)

It wasn’t only Samuel’s innocence that was important - he was holy, separated to God as a true Nazarite, 1 Samuel 1:11.

It’s worth me saying here that God always calls sin “sin”. Nowadays we hear it said that whilst the behaviour of Hophni and Phinehas would be wrong for children to encounter, it’s okay for grown-ups. Therefore grown men and women can do whatever they like to do. Let’s remember Eli’s warnings to his sons. As high priest, he spoke to them the word of the God: *“If one man sins against another, God will judge him. But if a man sins against the LORD, who will intercede for him?”* 1 Samuel 2:25. The Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ is that people should turn from their sinful ways to God in repentance, and, by placing their faith in Christ as Saviour, receive the forgiveness of sins.

Eli was given a final opportunity to rebuke and correct his erring sons. An unnamed man of God came to him. He reviewed all God’s promises to Eli’s ancestors, exposed the present family failures, and spelt out the detailed message of the LORD’s judgement upon them all. *“Why do you kick at My sacrifice and My offering...and honour your sons more than Me? ... Behold the days are coming that I will cut off your arm and the arm of your father’s house, so that there will not be an old man in your house ... Then I will raise up for Myself a faithful priest who shall do according to what is in My heart and in My mind”*, 1 Samuel 2:29-35.

God calls Samuel

However, as yet Samuel didn’t know the LORD in a personal way, nor had God’s word been disclosed to him, 1 Samuel 3:7. It was therefore necessary for God to personally call him. Whenever I think about the call of Samuel, the words of JD Burns’ hymn come to mind because I frequently sang them at Sunday School:

“Hushed was the evening hymn,
 The temple courts were dark,
 The lamp was burning dim
 Before the sacred ark:
 When suddenly a voice divine
 Rang through the silence of the shrine.

The old man, meek and mild,
 The priest of Israel, slept;
 His watch the temple child,
 The little Levite, kept;
 And what from Eli’s sense was sealed
 The Lord to Hannah’s son revealed.”

Not only was it night-time in Shiloh, but it was also a very dark period in Israel’s history. However, God wouldn’t let the testimony fail. He called Samuel “before the lamp of God went out”! (see 1 Samuel 3:3).

“The word of the LORD was rare in those days; there was no widespread revelation. And it came to pass at that time, while Eli was lying down in his place, and when his eyes had begun to grow so dim that he could not see, and before the lamp of God went out in the tabernacle of the LORD where the ark of God was, and while Samuel was lying down, that the LORD called Samuel. And he answered, “Here I am!” 1 Samuel 3:1-4.

Samuel ran and presented himself to Eli (1 Samuel 3:5), only to be told to lie down again because it wasn’t the old priest who had called him (1 Samuel 3:5). Eli was so spiritually out of tune with God, that it was only after the third call of the LORD that he realised God was calling His young servant! (1 Samuel 3:8) *“Therefore Eli said to Samuel, ‘Go, lie down; and it shall be, if He calls you, that you must say, ‘Speak, LORD, for Your servant hears’”... Now the LORD came and stood and called as at other times, ‘Samuel! Samuel!’ And Samuel answered, ‘Speak, for Your servant hears’”, 1 Samuel 3:9-10.*

Samuel serves the LORD

That night Samuel met the LORD, and from then, served Him. *“So Samuel grew, and the LORD was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba knew that Samuel had been established as a prophet of the LORD. Then the LORD appeared again in Shiloh. For the LORD revealed Himself to Samuel in Shiloh by the word of the LORD”, 1 Samuel 3:19-21.* A summary of Samuel’s activities is given in 1 Samuel 7:15-17: *“...Samuel judged Israel all the days of his life. He went from year to year on a circuit to Bethel, Gilgal and Mizpah, and judged Israel in all those places. But he always returned to Ramah, for his home was there. There he judged Israel, and there he built an altar to the LORD.”* Samuel started his service as a priest replacing the debauched sons of Eli; he was the last of the judges of Israel and the first of the Major Prophets who brought the LORD’S word to His people; he also introduced monarchy to Israel, though only at the people’s request.

God achieved mighty things through Samuel because he responded to His call and obeyed His commands. What God said, Samuel did! Have you heard God’s call? If so, have you reacted positively, like Samuel? *“The gifts and calling of God are irrevocable”,* Romans 11:29, as shown in this story by the LORD repeating Samuel’s name twice at the fourth time of calling (1 Samuel 3:10). God has a special job for each one of His children to do for Him in this dark world of sin. He will persist with us, as he did with Samuel, until we yield to His will. (He does speak to us today through prayer and more especially through His word, when we read it or hear it preached.)

Here’s another Frances Ridley Havergal hymn:

Master, speak! Thy servant heareth,
 Longing 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 feeds 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!

This story of Samuel teaches us to **“be diligent in making our own calling and election sure”**, 2 Peter 1:10. Those of us who are from Christian families must also have a personal faith in the Lord, as Samuel did. Of course, some of you will be just like me neither remembering the time nor the place when we first responded to His voice, but it's the knowledge of salvation that's important! It's so easy just to go along with an outward form of Christianity (see 2 Timothy 3:5), attending church, or being part of a fellowship, without a personal knowledge of Christ. Notice again 1 Samuel 2:12, *“Now the sons of Eli were corrupt; they did not know the LORD”*. They operated as priests, but in reality they had no living relationship with the LORD. They despised their birthright, and chose sin rather than holiness. I recall my own childhood - I went through Sunday School with a cousin of mine. We both heard the Gospel, and the Lord calling us to Himself, but my cousin rejected the Lord's gracious call! When our Bible Class teacher asked if we were saved, I was able to say “Yes”. Sadly, he replied “No”!

I also believe that God speaks, in some way, to each and every person in our world. At some time during life, there's an opportunity to respond. (God will also give further light to anyone who is sincere in seeking Him.) God's voice is heard today in the Gospel, by which He individually calls people to Himself. Have you heard Him call you by name? Today He calls again: *“Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me”*, Revelation 3:20.

Let's now use the last three verses of JD Burns' hymn as a closing prayer:

O, give me Samuel's ear!
 The open ear, O Lord,
 Alive and quick to hear
 Each whisper of Thy word;
 Like him to answer at Thy call,
 And to obey Thee first of all.

O, give me Samuel's heart!
 A lowly heart that waits
 Where in Thy house Thou art,
 Or watches at Thy gates,
 By day and night, a heart that still
 Moves at the breathing of Thy will.

O, give me Samuel's mind!
 A sweet un murmuring faith,
 Obedient and resigned
 To Thee in life and death;
 That I may read with child-like eyes
 Truths that are hidden from the wise.

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