

# Hearing From Heaven

By Ben Godwin



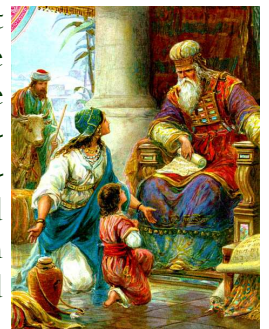
The question is not “is God speaking today?” but, rather, “are we listening?” Most Christians are familiar with the following verse, “If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I **hear from heaven**, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land.” (2 Chr. 7:14 KJV) In this passage, God promises to “hear from heaven” those who cry out in true repentance. This is the only time this phrase appears in Scripture. Certainly it is true that God can hear our prayers from heaven, but the opposite is also true—we can hear from heaven what the Spirit is saying to us personally and to the church collectively. Samuel is a prime example of someone who “heard from heaven” when others weren’t listening. Samuel played a pivotal role in the transitional period between the Judges and the Kings of Israel. The “*days when the Judges ruled*” covered a 300-year span from the death of Joshua to the coronation of King Saul. “In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did that which was right in his own eyes.” (Jgs. 21:25) The times of the Judges were characterized by this sad cycle:

1. **Apostasy:** Israel backslid into idolatry.
2. **Oppression:** God allowed their enemies to invade their land and rule over them.
3. **Repentance:** Israel cried out in desperation to God.
4. **Deliverance:** God raised up a deliverer (judge) to liberate Israel and bring revival.

God raise up 15 Judges in all to lead Israel and deliver them from their enemies (i.e. Othniel, Ehud, Shamgar, Deborah, Gideon, Samson, etc.). This cycle repeated itself no fewer than seven times. Bible commentator Herbert Lockyer wrote, “*The Book [of Judges] is a record of 7 apostasies, 7 servitudes, 7 cries to God and 7 deliverances.*” Samuel was not only a priest and a prophet but the last true judge of that era.

## Asked Of God

Fittingly, Samuel’s name means “*Asked of God.*” His barren mother, Hannah, wept and prayed so desperately for God to give her a son that Eli, the High Priest, thought she was drunk (1 Sam. 1:9-17). Hannah vowed that if Jehovah granted her a son, she’d give him back for lifelong service. God not only gave her a son, but four sons and two daughters (1 Sam. 2:21). When Samuel was weaned, she brought him to Eli to serve in the Tabernacle. Talk about being raised in church! Eli became Samuel’s surrogate father and Samuel wore a linen ephod (a priest’s vest-like apron) as he ministered under Eli as an apprentice. Hannah made a special coat each year and brought it to him when she and her husband, Elkanah, made their annual pilgrimage to Shiloh to offer sacrifice.



## A Rose Among Thorns

To Eli’s credit, he apparently raised Samuel better than his own two renegade sons, Hophni and Phinehas. They were “*sons of belial; they knew not the Lord*” (1 Sam. 2:12). That term “belial” is used seventeen times in the Bible and is an epithet for Satan. It literally means “worthless, wicked, or lawless fellows.” Their sin was twofold: (1) making mockery of the Lord’s offerings by greedily taking more (sometimes by force) than their allotted portion and (2) seducing women who came to worship into sexual sin. There is a big dif-

ference between being *around* the things of God and having a genuine heart *after* God. Eli's half-hearted rebukes had little effect. He should have removed his sons from the priesthood. Instead, Eli allowed the disgrace to continue while judgment loomed over Israel like an ominous cloud. Samuel stood out as a rose among thorns by living above reproach while the priesthood was in a state of moral decay. He maintained his conviction while surrounded by corruption. From Samuel we learn that we can live godly lives even in an ungodly environment. We don't have to succumb to the corrosive influences around us.

### *Dim Eyes & Dull Ears*

With a negligent High Priest and his vile sons ignoring His voice, God found someone else to speak to—a lad with an sincere heart and a sensitive ear. “...*And the Word of the Lord was precious in those days; there was no open vision.*” The word *precious* in this verse means “rare, uncommon or seldom heard.” Furthermore, Eli, in his late nineties, lost his eyesight. His eyes were physically dim and his ears spiritually deaf. Eli and his sons repeatedly ignored God's voice until He eventually bypassed them to speak to the next generation.

Years ago, my wife and I took our kids to a Christian Summer camp. They came home with painful ear infections from all the swimming they did. It probably started out as swimmer's ear and then progressed into full-blown infections. Nathan, my son, got the worst of it. I would say something to him and I thought he was just ignoring me. Frustrated, I'd repeat it louder and louder until he finally responded. His Pediatrician discovered a wax build up that completely blocked his ear canal. Once they dissolved it and flushed it out, he could hear fine. Later I wondered how frustrating it must be to God when we allow worldly things to build up and block our spiritual hearing. Perhaps this is what Jeremiah meant when he wrote, “*Behold, their ear is uncircumcised, and they cannot hearken....*” (Jer. 6:10)

### *A Stranger In The Night*

When God appeared as a stranger in the night and called Samuel by name, he initially thought it was Eli. Let's make several important observations here:

**1. God initiated the dialogue.** Samuel wasn't asking God to speak to him. Rather, God chose to reveal Himself to Samuel. God can speak to us in many ways (an audible voice, through the Bible, in visions, dreams prophecies, sermons, songs, books, drama, etc.). Often God speaks to us through the inner witness of the Holy Spirit. “*The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God....*” (Rom. 8:16) “*And it is the Spirit who bears witness, because the Spirit is truth.*” (1 Jn. 5:6) I am convinced that God wants to speak to us much more than we want Him to. But we must learn to be sensitive to His voice. Jesus said, “*I have yet **many things to say unto you...when He, the Spirit of truth is come...He will shew you things to come.***” (Jn. 16:12-13) God desires to speak to every believer, including you! What kind of father doesn't want to talk to his kids? We just need to tune in and listen.

**2. God spoke when Samuel was still.** “*While Samuel was lying down....*” (1 Sam. 3:3) The time of day is irrelevant, but the key was Samuel wasn't distracted. I believe we often miss the voice of God because we don't stay still long enough to hear Him. Our lives have become so fast-paced and complicated. Someone said, “Life is a ratrace and the rats are winning!” Sometimes it feels that way. We are overrun by the latest technology (and thank God for it)—cell phones, faxes, E-mail, voice mail, instant and text messages, pagers, the internet, etc. Communication has never been better. But are we communicating with everyone except God? Is His voice being drowned out by all the other voices competing for our time and attention? To hear God's voice, it helps to get still and quiet, away from all of the distractions and demands of life and ministry. When Elijah retreated

from Jezebel's threat, God spoke to him in a unique way. First, he heard a wind, then he saw an earthquake and then a fire. God was not in any of them (although God has used all three methods in history to achieve His purposes). Finally, there came "A still small voice." (1 Kgs. 19:11-12) Other versions render this phrase "a gentle whisper." In order to hear a whisper, you must be still and quiet. God was in the voice. Simply put, if we want God's attention, we must give Him our attention! The Psalmist must have understood this when he wrote, "**Be still** and know that I am God." (Ps. 46:10)

**3. God's voice sounded like Eli's voice.** Perhaps God disguised His voice so Eli would know that He was talking to Samuel. Somehow God's voice sounded like Eli's voice. The first three times God called him, Samuel thought it was Eli and ran to his room and asked what he needed. How often do we make the same mistake? I wonder how many times God tried to speak to us through our spouse, children, friends, pastor, etc., and we shrugged it off because we thought it was just *them* when, actually, it was God speaking through them.

**4. God's voice became familiar to Samuel.** "Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, nor was the word of the Lord yet revealed to him." (1 Sam. 3:7 NKJV) Samuel knew plenty *about* God from growing up around the Tabernacle. But he'd never had a personal encounter with God. There is only one way to learn God's voice—by spending time in His presence. Samuel learned God's voice by a lifetime of listening. If a close friend or relative calls you on the phone, you immediately recognize their voice. Why? Because you've heard their voice many times. Even newborn babies can recognize their parent's voices and often turn or look in the direction of the sound. How? They've spend nine months in the womb eavesdropping. The point is the more you listen to God's voice, the more familiar it becomes. Jesus said, "The sheep hear his voice; and he calls his own sheep by name...and the sheep follow him, for they **know his voice**...My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me." (Jn. 10:3-4, 27 NKJV).

Samuel was later esteemed as a great prophet, priest and judge in Israel. In fact, he anointed and appointed the first two Kings of Israel, Saul and David. His prophecies were fulfilled and, because he listened to God, people listened to him. His words had impact! "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." (1 Sam. 3:19-20 NKJV) It all started when he was just a child. God singled him out and started speaking to him. Nobody else, it seemed, was listening. God is still speaking today. Are we listening? When was the last time you heard from heaven? He that has an ear, let him hear.

