

## **Introduction**

I begin by asking you a question. Do you hear God speak to you? If not, why don't you? Is it that He isn't speaking to you? Or is it that He's speaking to you but you aren't hearing Him? In either case, this sermon is for you. It tells us what we need to do to hear God's voice. We need to listen and that's what 1 Samuel 3:1-14 is all about.

## **God Speaks to Us**

The Old Testament has four central figures – Moses, David, Elijah, and Samuel. Samuel was one of the greatest prophets and the very last judge in the Old Testament. His mother, Hannah, dedicated him to God when he was born. He left home, therefore, as a boy and began ministering to Him by assisting His priest, Eli. That brings us to the narrative in 3:1-14, which is a simple one. God spoke to Samuel one night and told him He was going to judge Eli and his sons for their sins.

That simple narrative illustrates one of the most astonishing truths of our existence. The infinite triune God speaks to us.

Many Christians don't believe that. Yes, they do know that God spoke to many people in the Bible. But they believe that He did so only because those people were a special kind of humanity whose callings were higher and holier ours are. Remember what Lloyd Benson said to Dan Quale in their vice-presidential debate, ***"You're no John Kennedy."*** Many Christians have that same kind of attitude in the context of God speaking, ***"I'm no Samuel, Moses, David, or Elijah."***

But in reality, they are. Listen to what James 5:17 says, ***"Elijah was a man with a nature like ours."*** That teaches us an essential truth. The people to whom God spoke in the Bible weren't a special kind of humanity. All of them had a nature like ours. If He spoke to them, then He'll speak to us as well and does.

I'd explain it this way. The Bible teaches that we can have an ongoing conversational relationship with God. The words ***"ongoing"***

and ***“conversational”*** are intentional and precise. Christians talk all the time about relationship with Him but don't fully grasp what that means. It means there is conversation. We speak to God and He listens to us. And He speaks to us and we listen to Him. Too many Christians define relationship exclusively in terms of the first of those. They believe in they speaking to Him. They do not believe in He speaking to them.

I once taught a Sunday school class and said that God speaks to us through the Bible and in other ways. A couple, who apparently believe He speaks to us only through the Bible, left the church as a result. They wrote me a letter explaining why. Part of it said this: ***“Recently there has been what seems to be a Pentecostal movement within the teachings of the church which are not stated in the church’s mission statement and which we are not comfortable with.”***

I felt sad for them. They're missing out on the very essence of the abundant life that the Bible says we can have. I talk all the time about having pervasive and habitual love, peace, and joy. But we can have that only in the context of an ongoing conversational relationship with God. To live abundantly, we must converse with Him. To converse with Him, we must believe He speaks to us – because He does.

### **How God Speaks to Us**

Now that we know that God speaks to us, let's examine how He does that. He speaks to us five specific ways.

The first way is through audible voice. That's how He spoke to Samuel. In verses 4, 6, 8, and 10, He orally called out his name. Then in verses 11-14, He verbalized a message to him. Sometimes, the audible voice is accompanied by a phenomenon or material manifestation, like the burning bush of Moses. A Christian testifies that he saw a bright light and heard God say from it, ***“Peter, I love you.”*** That's audible voice.

The second way that God speaks to us is through supernatural messengers, angels. Hebrews 1:14 teaches that angels are ***“ministering spirits, sent out to render service for the sake of those who will***

*inherit salvation.*” One of their services is to bring words from God to us. Billy Graham gives many modern examples of this in his book *Angels*.

God speaks to us a third way – through dreams and visions. Dreams occur when we’re asleep. Visions occur when we’re awake but in a trancelike state. Not long ago, I asked God a specific question. The next night, I dreamed of having a conversation with John Mraz at his house. During it, he told me something that I took to be God’s answer to the question I asked. He spoke to me through the dream.

There’s a fourth way God speaks to us – through the human voice. He is with a person’s mouth, to quote Exodus 4:12. He puts words in his or her mouth. He and the person speak conjointly in other words to us. He speaks in union with him or her. Two weeks ago, Anthony Rothwell and I were talking in my office. I didn’t tell him at the time but he said something that I took to be God speaking with Him. It was something that He spoke straight to me and that I needed to hear.

God speaks to us in a fifth and final way - through the human spirit. The verse at the top of your bulletin, Proverbs 20:27, teaches us just that, ***“The spirit of man is the candle of the Lord, searching the innermost parts of his being.”*** The “spirit of man” refers to our inner processes, that is, our mental, emotional, and volitional processes. Those processes are God’s candle or in modern terms, His flashlight. That means that He inhabits and illuminates those processes. He directs our mind to one thought or another, our mind to one emotion or another, or our heart to one desire or another. He makes His thought our thought, His emotion our emotion, or His desire our desire. He speaks to us, in other words, through our thoughts, emotions, or desires. Those thoughts, emotions, or desires come from Him not us and tell us what He wants us to know or do. The KJV of the Bible, in 1 Kings 19:12, gives us a name for this, “the still small voice” of God.

The still small voice is God’s preferred way of speaking to us. That’s because it’s the one way that most engages our faculties as free intelligent human beings. Consequently, the more spiritually mature we

are, the more He speaks to us in that way. Take the analogy I used earlier, for instance, the vice-presidential debate. It “popped into my mind” as we say it. I knew instantly that the thought was from God.

Those then are the five ways, apart from the Bible, that God speaks to us: audible voice, supernatural messengers, dreams and visions, the human voice, and the human spirit or still small voice of God.

That doesn't mean though that He speaks to us every minute or hour of every day. It would diminish our lives and stifle our growth if He did. But He does speak consistently to us as anyone would in a close personal relationship. He says things to us that guide, encourage, inform, convict, correct, and so on as we need them. Dallas Willard says it this way: ***“He speaks with us individually as it is appropriate – as is usual between persons who know one another, care about one another, and are engaged in common enterprises.”***

### **To Whom God Speaks**

To this point, we know two things: that God speaks to us and how He does. But we also need to know to whom He speaks.

For years, I asked a question that many frustrated Christians ask, ***“Why won't God speak to me?”*** But the better question is ***“Why should He speak to me?”*** There's something we need to know. God only speaks to us when it's a reasonable thing to do. That means, conversely, He won't speak to us if it's an unreasonable thing to do. That's why the better question is ***“Why should He speak to me?”***

The right answer isn't ***“because I want my needs met.”*** If we don't seek God speaking to us when we don't need it, then He won't speak to us when we do need it. The right answer also isn't ***“because I want to be important.”*** If we seek He speaking to us so that we'll be great like Samuel and the rest, we can count on the fact that He won't. In both cases, it would be an unreasonable thing to do and He doesn't.

Why should God speak to me? The right answer is ***“because I want to know, love, obey, and serve Him.”*** There is a condition for He

speaking consistently to us and that's it. We've come to the point in our lives where our first aim is to know, love, obey, and serve Him. That's our first aim and we're trying the best we can to achieve it. It's a reasonable thing for God to speak to us in that context and He does.

I know that by experience. For much of my pastoral life, for instance, I prepared and preached sermons as if it was my work. So God didn't speak to me in that setting as a result. But now, I prepare and preach sermons as if it's His work and I'm only serving Him. I always ask Him what He wants me to preach about and He either tells me or lets me choose. After that, I ask Him if there's anything in particular He wants me to say and He often tells me. He consistently speaks to me about that, usually through His still small voice. The text, 1 Samuel 3, and the title, *Speak, I'm Listening*, of today's sermon in fact are His not mine.

My point is this. It's a reasonable thing for God to consistently speak to us if we're trying the best we can to know, love, body, and serve Him. So that's exactly what He does. He speaks consistently to us.

### **How to Listen When God Speak**

And we need to hear Him when He does. Obviously, it doesn't do much good if He speaks but we don't hear Him. But how do we hear Him? This passage tells us. It's by doing two things.

First, we learn - everything we can about God speaking.

Some of you are probably wondering. How did I know that the dream, Anthony's statement, and the thought I had about the vice-presidential debate were God's voice. How was I able to discern that? It's because of what I've learned about He speaking. Notice something. He spoke to Samuel. But Samuel didn't know it was His voice until he learned what Eli taught him in verse 9. That same thing is true of us. Suppose that I hadn't learned what I've preached about today. The dream, Anthony's voice, and the thought would have slipped right by me. I would not have known that God was speaking to me through them. I would have mistaken them for something else and thus not heard His

voice.

So let's try our best to learn everything we can about God speaking to us. We do that by studying what the Bible, other books, testimonies, and experience teach us about it. After the Bible, the best book I've ever read about He speaking to us is Dallas Willard's titled *Hearing God's Voice*. It teaches us almost everything we need to know about that.

We hear God speak by doing a second thing. The celebrated line in verse 10 tells us what that is. We listen. To listen means to expect and watch for Him to speak to us. That's exactly what Samuel did. After learning what Eli said in verse 9, he expected and watched for God to speak in verse 10. He anticipated that He would speak and was alert to He doing so. That's what Samuel did and so should we. We should expect and watch for God to speak to us. We should anticipate that He will and be alert to He doing so. We keep our eyes, ears, and minds open for His voice. We'll hear it if we do.

That's what I do. I actually expect and watch for God to speak to me. Whenever someone talks to me, for instance, I'm aware that God can speak to me through them and am alert that He might. That's how I heard His voice in Anthony's. Or whenever thoughts, emotions, and desires "pop" into my mind or heart, I'm aware that God can speak to me through them and am alert that He might. That's how I heard God's voice in the thought about the vice-presidential debate.

We're often told to listen and learn. But in this case we need to learn and listen. We learn about God speaking to us and then listen for Him to. We keep our eyes, ears, and minds objectively open for His voice. We expect and watch for Him to speak to us. He will if we do.

## **Conclusion**

I close this morning with another analogy. Remember the old E.F. Hutton commercial: "***When E.F. Hutton speaks, people listen.***" May you and I as His disciples and friends, do the same thing with God. When He speaks, just like Samuel did, let's listen.