

Samuel hears the LORD

1 Samuel 3:1–21 · Junior primary · Lesson 3

The LORD makes His word known and faithfully brings it about, so we should listen to Him and receive His truth.

Estimated reading time: 15 minutes

Read 1 Samuel 3:1–21 from beginning to end. The repeated calls in the night are memorable, but the chapter does not finish when Samuel learns who is speaking. It continues through a difficult message, an anxious morning and the growing recognition that the LORD has established Samuel as His prophet. Keep that whole movement in view. Otherwise, an account about God making His trustworthy word known can become little more than advice about being quiet at bedtime.

Read 1 Samuel 1:20–28 and 2:12–36 for the setting. Hannah has brought Samuel to serve the LORD at Shiloh. Eli is the priest under whose care he serves, but Eli's sons have treated their priestly responsibilities with contempt. A warning has already been spoken against the household. The word Samuel receives in chapter 3 belongs to that history; it is not an unexplained punishment suddenly introduced to frighten him.

On your second reading, notice what Samuel knows at each point and what he still needs to learn. Then look at the contrast between the opening and closing verses. At the beginning, the LORD's word is rare; by the end, His word is being made known through Samuel. Read Hebrews 1:1–4 as well, to see how the Bible's account of God speaking through prophets leads us towards His supreme revelation in the Son.

The first two lessons have introduced God's witness in creation and the saving purpose of Scripture. Now we meet one of the people through whom God made His word known in Israel's history. Samuel lived long before Jesus' earthly ministry, during the period before Israel's first kings. He would later have an important part in the accounts of Saul and David, but here he is still a boy serving at Shiloh.

Shiloh was a place where Israel gathered to worship. The ark of God was there, and Samuel's mother had brought him to the LORD's service after his birth in answer to her prayer. The chapter calls the sanctuary the LORD's temple or house. This is not Solomon's later temple in Jerusalem. The difference matters because children can easily merge every biblical place of worship into one building if we do not give them a little orientation.

The narrator sets the night scene with restrained, concrete details. Eli's sight is failing. Samuel is lying down. The lamp has not yet gone out. These details help us follow what happens without needing an invented description of the room, Samuel's exact age or the appearance of God. The Scriptures give us enough to enter the account while leaving other details unstated.

It helps to pause before the familiar night-time scene and notice where authority lies. Eli already has a recognised place in Israel's worship; Samuel is still learning to serve. Yet the LORD is free to address the boy and give him a word concerning the priest's household. God's message is not made true by the speaker's age or position. That will matter when Samuel later addresses Israel's rulers, but it matters here first. The priest must receive a word he did not choose from a messenger he did not appoint. The account quietly unsettles any assumption that an important religious person stands above correction.

The LORD calls Samuel and makes Himself known — 1 Samuel 3:1–10

The opening statement is sobering: the word of the LORD was rare, and prophetic visions were not widespread. Israel still had worship and priests, but the presence of religious activity did not mean everything was spiritually well. The preceding chapter has shown serious wrongdoing among people who should have honoured God. Read those chapters together without claiming that this one sentence supplies every reason for the scarcity of revelation.

Into that setting, the LORD calls Samuel. The boy answers and runs to Eli. His response makes sense: he knows Eli, serves near him and hears himself being called. The narrator allows us to follow Samuel's misunderstanding rather than making him appear foolish. He is responding to the information he has, and the account explicitly explains that the LORD's word has not yet been revealed to him.

The call comes again, and then a third time. Repetition gives the account its movement, but it should not become a classroom game that loses the question of who is speaking. Eli eventually recognises what is happening and gives Samuel a response. The teacher can retell the repeated journeys briefly, letting the children notice the change from misunderstanding to recognition.

Eli's role deserves care. He has failed in grave ways within his household, yet here he helps Samuel recognise the LORD's call. Scripture is often more truthful about people than a simple good-person/bad-person division allows. We can acknowledge the useful help Eli gives without excusing his failure to restrain his sons. Neither a position in worship nor a correct piece of advice places someone beyond accountability.

Samuel then answers the LORD as a listening servant. The decisive action belongs to God: He calls, approaches and makes His word known. Samuel does not discover a method for producing a revelation. His response is appropriate to the particular encounter God has initiated.

That distinction protects the children's application. We can learn humble attention from Samuel, but we are not promising that a quiet child will hear an audible voice during the night. In this lesson, we know what the LORD said because the account is written in Scripture. Opening the Bible and receiving its meaning is a clear, shared way of listening to God's word.

At this point, the story could feel comfortably complete: the boy has answered, and the misunderstanding is resolved. But what will God say? The next movement is essential because the LORD's word is not always what the hearer would have chosen.

Samuel receives a difficult word and tells it truthfully — 1 Samuel 3:11–18

The message concerns judgement against Eli's household. Chapter 2 has described his sons' contempt for the offerings and their abuse of their position. Eli knew of their conduct and had spoken against it, but he had not restrained them as he should. The judgement does not arise because an old man has poor eyesight or because a child misunderstood a voice. It addresses known, serious wrongdoing.

For young children, the necessary explanation can be plain and bounded: Eli's sons were doing serious wrong in the place where people came to worship, and Eli had failed to stop them. God knew, and His warning was true. The adult preparation gives you the fuller context so that you can answer responsibly; the class does not need disturbing details or a dramatic performance of the harm.

God says that the iniquity of the household will not be wiped out by sacrifice or offering. Sacrifices were never a device for controlling God while deliberately continuing in rebellion. This is a solemn word of judgement against this household, not an announcement that a repentant child has committed some unknowable sin beyond forgiveness. Keep the particular judgement and the wider gospel invitation distinct.

Morning comes, and Samuel opens the doors of the LORD's house. That ordinary action places the weighty message within the continuation of his service. The text tells us he is afraid to tell Eli. We do not have to invent his thoughts to recognise the difficulty: the message concerns the adult under whose care he lives and serves.

Eli asks what the LORD has said and presses Samuel not to hide it. Samuel tells him everything. The young messenger's responsibility is to deliver the word he received, including the part that is painful to hear. This is different from enjoying an opportunity to condemn someone. Truthfulness does not require cruelty, and the passage gives no permission to frighten children into making disclosures.

Eli acknowledges the LORD's right to do what He judges good. We should not use that brief response to claim more about Eli's inner state than the text gives us. The chapter's emphasis remains the LORD's true word and Samuel's faithful report. God's judgement will not be cancelled because the message is unwelcome.

Here is a useful challenge for the teacher as well as the child. Are we willing to receive Scripture when it corrects something familiar or comfortable? Listening means more than enjoying a story. Yet before we press that application, the chapter gives us one more foundation: how was Israel to recognise Samuel as a prophet?

The LORD confirms His prophet — 1 Samuel 3:19–21

The closing verses move beyond the single night. Samuel grows, the LORD is with him, and God fulfils what Samuel prophesies. The CSB makes the meaning of the Hebrew picture clear in its main wording; the footnote describes words not falling to the ground. The point is their reliable fulfilment, not the physical movement of spoken sounds.

Israel comes to recognise Samuel as a confirmed prophet of the LORD. The expression from Dan to Beer-sheba gives a sense of the recognition reaching across the people's land. You need not ask the children to memorise those place names for this lesson. Explain that the recognition spread through Israel rather than remaining a private claim made by Samuel about himself.

A prophet is someone appointed to communicate God's message. That can include announcing what will happen, but predicting the future is not the whole task. Samuel must speak what God gives him, including judgement and instruction. His authority is borrowed from the One who speaks; it does not grow out of his age, confidence or ability to tell an impressive story.

The final verse says that the LORD continued to reveal Himself at Shiloh by His word. Compare that with the rarity described at the start. The chapter has shown God opening a new period of prophetic ministry. He is providing His people with truthful revelation in the midst of serious failure.

That gives the children a substantial conclusion. Samuel heard because the LORD called; he told what the LORD said; Israel recognised the prophet because the LORD fulfilled His word. The order matters. We are not teaching that any person who speaks confidently for God must be believed. The account itself supplies the reason for recognising Samuel.

God's Son makes Him known and saves sinners

The people need God's true word, and the priestly household's failure shows that proximity to worship cannot cure sin. Samuel is a real provision in Israel's history, but he is not the final answer to the need of sinners. Hebrews 1:1–4 places the prophets within the larger movement of God's revelation: God spoke through them in earlier times and has now spoken by His Son.

Jesus is greater than a messenger who faithfully repeats words received from someone else. He is the Son who perfectly makes God known. Hebrews joins His revelation of God with His saving work: He made purification for sins and reigns at God's right hand. The One we must hear is also the One who provides the cleansing we cannot supply.

Explain that connection in ordinary language. We have sinned and cannot make ourselves right with God by listening carefully enough or serving in a religious place. Jesus lived without sin, gave His life for sinners and rose again. We turn from sin and trust Him for forgiveness. His grace then gives us reason to receive His teaching and live under His authority.

There is no need to make Samuel's bed, the lamp or the opened doors into hidden pictures of Jesus. The canonical connection is already strong: God's prophetic word is trustworthy, and His Son is the fullest revelation and the saving answer. Let that connection do its work without adding an imaginative code to the account.

Revelation is God making Himself known. Prophetic authority rests on God's appointment and truthful message, not the messenger's personal importance. This chapter shows that authority being established through God's action and the fulfilment of His word. A Sunday School teacher serves under that written word; the teacher does not inherit Samuel's unique prophetic commission.

Children can learn to distinguish the Bible's account from someone's claim to have a private message. We should never use "God told me" to make a child obey an unverified demand, especially one involving secrecy or harm. Explain Scripture openly and allow questions. A faithful teacher wants the hearer to understand the text, not to become dependent on the teacher's supposed access to hidden information.

Different Christians discuss the ways God may guide His people today. This lesson does not need to settle every part of that discussion. It can teach with confidence that Scripture supplies the authoritative account we are studying and that no claimed guidance can overturn God's revealed truth or excuse wrongdoing.

Listening without manufacturing Samuel's experience

Did Samuel not believe in God before this night?

Verse 7 explains his not yet knowing the LORD in relation to the word not yet having been revealed to him. He is already serving in the sanctuary. The passage is explaining why he does not recognise this call, not giving us a complete account of every stage of his spiritual life. Avoid using it to announce a precise conversion moment the narrator does not identify.

Will God call my name at night?

This account records what God did with Samuel; it does not promise the same experience to every child. Say that we can read what God made known here and listen to His teaching in the Bible. Do not organise a silence exercise that encourages children to report imagined voices, or make an extraordinary experience the test of being loved by God.

Why is God's message so serious?

The wrongdoing was serious, and warnings had already been given. God's judgement shows that worship cannot be used to hide persistent evil. Keep the explanation tied to the actual household rather than threatening the class with the same outcome for ordinary childhood mistakes. The gospel invites sinners to turn to Christ; do not imply that asking for mercy is pointless.

Does telling the truth mean a child must confront an unsafe adult?

No. Samuel's particular role is not a general instruction for children to challenge someone who may harm them. A child who needs help should be heard and protected through appropriate safeguarding arrangements. Do not seek personal examples during the lesson, investigate a disclosure or promise secrecy. The classroom task concerns retelling the biblical account accurately.

Bringing this to the children

Children should retell the whole movement and recognise why the LORD's word is trustworthy. Keep God's initiative and fulfilled message central; Samuel's response is not a technique for receiving voices.

Have ready: Print Printable Resources single-sided at actual size: pages 1 and 4 for display, one uncut page 3 to show its captions, and pages 2–3 for each child plus a teacher sample. Have one Parent take-home and one envelope per child, crayons, a tray, an open Bible and a scrap of paper for memory recall. Before class an adult cuts the three solid outside rectangles on page 3, keeping each caption and drawing space together. Make one sample set: an ear-shaped curve, two people and a tick, with no picture of God. Try placing and mixing the pieces on page 2's numbered route without glue. Children receive loose, undrawn pieces. With your helper, practise reading captions, distributing three-piece sets and listening to retelling while helping children arrange them.

Remember together: Use page 4's complete Psalm 33:4. Explain right as true and good and trustworthy as dependable. Connect each phrase with the account, then cover one word for supported recall.

SCRIPTURE

For the word of the LORD is right,
and all his work is trustworthy.

Psalm 33:4, CSB

Listen for understanding: Ask who called, what Samuel passed on and how God confirmed His word. If a child expects a night-time voice, explain the particular event and point to the written account we can all hear. Ask them to explain the difference again; both adults listen during making.

Reflect before teaching:

- Do I allow Scripture to correct trusted habits and people, including myself?
- How do I respond when a learner needs a second explanation before understanding?
- Can I distinguish the authority of God's word from my own position as its teacher?
- What would it mean to handle a difficult biblical warning with both honesty and pastoral care?

Pray before teaching:

Thank the LORD for making His word known and for speaking fully through His Son. Ask for humble attention, faithful explanation and courage to receive correction. Pray that the children will recognise His truthfulness and that your words will help them understand without creating fear about imagined voices or hidden demands.

Tell God's words from the supplied Scripture reading. Do not assign a child to act as God, recreate a frightening night or demand that children tell private things. Keep the difficult message within the brief explanation supplied above. The closing question should reach the LORD's faithfulness, not end with praise for Samuel being a polite boy.

Before you teach: explain where Samuel is, why he initially goes to Eli, what the difficult message concerns and how God confirms His prophet. Then explain how Hebrews 1 leads us to Jesus without treating Samuel's experience as a promise of private revelation for every child.

For further reading:

Read 1 Samuel 3 alongside chapter 1 and chapter 2. Hebrews 1:1–4 supplies the connection from the prophets to the Son.

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