

THE LORD CALLS SAMUEL

I Samuel 3

It is important that the children see the fallacy of thinking that we can lead and govern ourselves apart from regular worship of the Lord and obedience to Him. The sin of Eli's sons shows how even worship can be degraded by selfishness, self-satisfaction, and disobedience.

Doctrinal Points

*The doctrine of "remains": the Lord's work in our childhood.
Memory knowledge of the letter of the Word is one of the essentials.
The book of Ruth does not have an inner sense.*

Notes for Parents

The beautiful story of the child Samuel is one of the most familiar in the Bible. His mother's longing for a child led her to promise that if the Lord would only give her a son, she would devote him to the Lord's service. When her son was born, she named him Samuel, which means "God hath heard." And she kept her promise by bringing him to the tabernacle as soon as he was weaned and giving him to Eli, the high priest, to bring up in the service of the tabernacle. The Bible tells us that her faithfulness was rewarded, for the Lord afterward gave her three more sons and two daughters.

We think so much of little Samuel that we are likely to forget the dark things in the story. Eli was a good old man, but his two sons—to whom he had turned over the active conduct of the tabernacle worship—were using their high office for their own profit. Eli knew it and had remonstrated with them, but he did not exercise his authority as he might have done to put a stop to their evil practices. So the message that came to Eli through the child Samuel was that the high priesthood would be taken away from his house.

There are lessons here for all of us. Today we sometimes see ministers who appear to care more for their own glory than for the service of the Lord, and there are people who go to church because it is “good business” or so that they will be looked up to in the community, or because a community where there are churches is safer to live in. And the knowledge that there are such people in the church may turn some people away from it, just as it did in Samuel’s time. But if we really want to follow the Lord, what other people do will not keep us from worship or from bringing up our children in the service of the Lord.

For our children do come to us from the Lord, and they really belong to Him. They are His children first. They are loaned to us for a time to love and care for and to bring to Him as soon as they are old enough to learn of Him. We should see to it that our children have every opportunity to hear the Lord’s voice while they are young and open-minded, so that they may answer as Samuel did: “Speak, Lord; for thy servant heareth.”

Primary

The story of Samuel is a vivid one and easy to tell. The teacher should know the story of the first three chapters and tell it as one story. Review the history of the ark and the tabernacle, pointing out that in spite of the many enemies who had passed over the land in the time of the Judges, the tabernacle in the time of our lesson still stands at Shiloh where Joshua had set it up, a descendant of Aaron is still high priest, and some faithful people still come to the tabernacle to worship. Samuel’s obedience and willing service should be stressed.

Near the end of the time of the Judges there lived a good woman named Hannah. Hannah had no children, and she wanted a child very much. At the time of one of the great Jewish feasts, Hannah and her husband went to Shiloh, the place where the tabernacle had been set up. There at the tabernacle Hannah prayed the Lord to give her a child, and she promised that if the Lord gave her a child, she would give him to the service of the Lord.

The Lord granted Hannah’s prayer. She named her child Samuel,

which means “God hath heard.” And when Samuel was old enough, she brought him back to Shiloh and gave him to Eli, the high priest, to bring up in the service of the tabernacle. Eli taught him to do all the things a little boy could do to help him.

Eli was a good man but he was very old and growing blind, and he had to have his two sons do most of the things that the high priest usually did in the services and sacrifices of the tabernacle.

The two sons of Eli were also priests, but they were wicked men.

They took for themselves offerings which should have been given to the Lord. The Lord had warned Eli about them, but Eli was not brave enough to stop them.

So the Lord gave Samuel a message for Eli.

How many times did the Lord speak to Samuel?

What did Samuel think at first?

What did Eli finally tell him to do?

What message did the Lord give him?

Now read verses 19 to 21 of the chapter.

The Lord speaks to us in the Word, and He wants each one of us to listen to Him and obey Him as Samuel did. Then He can always be with us and help us to do right. You may be glad, too, to know that because Hannah kept her promise to the Lord, He afterward gave her more children—three sons and two daughters.

After Samuel grew up, Eli’s wicked sons were killed in a battle and Eli died when he heard the news. But Samuel became the leader of all the children of Israel. He was a priest, the last of the Judges, and a prophet.

Junior

This is a good opportunity to see what the Juniors remember about the tabernacle and the ark. Remind them that the Lord promised to speak to the people from the mercy seat above the ark. Then read the first and last verses of our chapter for today, and use this as the basis for describing the condition into which worship had fallen in the time of the Judges and what Samuel accomplished for his people even as a small boy. Have them look up all the Bible references.

Do you remember what was the characteristic of the period of

the Judges? If you have forgotten, read Judges 17:6. This shows us why the ark and the tabernacle are not mentioned once in the book of Judges. When we think we are wise enough to decide for ourselves what is right and wrong, the Lord and the church seem to drop out of our minds. But they are really there all the time, hidden deep within our lives. In the same way, the ark and the tabernacle were still there in the very center of the Holy Land.

Where was the tabernacle at this time?

Who was the first high priest?

The high priest was always to be one of his descendants.

Who was the high priest at the time of Samuel's birth?

Even though most of the people had turned to idol worship and forgotten the Lord, there were still some faithful ones who tried to keep the law of Moses and who went regularly to the tabernacle to worship. Samuel's parents were among these.

What were their names?

Their home was in Ramah, in the territory of Ephraim, to which tribe Elkanah belonged. In the first two chapters of I Samuel we learn that Hannah had no children and that, when they came up to the tabernacle for one of the feasts, she prayed the Lord for a child, and promised if she had one to give him to the service of the Lord. So, when Samuel was born she named him Samuel, which means "God hath heard," and as soon as he was old enough, she brought him to Eli to be brought up in the service of the tabernacle.

Eli at this time was an old man and becoming blind. His sons, Hophni and Phinehas, attended to the active duties of the priesthood. We learn how they profaned their high office by taking more than their fair shares of the offerings brought to the tabernacle and by taking the part allotted to them without consecrating it as they were supposed to do. Eli was told of their offenses and rebuked them, but he did not exercise his authority and put a stop to them. So he was warned by a prophet that he and his house should not continue to hold the priesthood. Eli was a good man, but weak.

Samuel was trained by Eli to do the things which a small boy could do to help around the tabernacle. Verse 15 of our chapter tells us one of his duties, and he also evidently waited upon Eli.

What was Samuel doing when the Lord called him?

What did he think at first?

How many times did the Lord call him?

What did Eli finally tell him to do?

Hearing pictures obedience. When your mother says, “Do you hear me?” you know that she means, “Mind!” Whenever in the Bible we read, “He that hath ears to hear, let him hear,” we know that we are being urged to listen and obey.

What do you think it means when the Bible says, “Their ears they have stopped”?

Do we ever “stop” our ears when we do not want to obey?

Thus when Samuel said, “Speak; for thy servant heareth,” it meant that he would obey the Lord, and we find that always did obey the Lord even to the end of his life.

What did the Lord tell Samuel to say to Eli?

How did Eli receive the message?

To see how this message was fulfilled, read I Samuel 4:10-18.

Verses 19 to 21 of our chapter tell us that the people soon learned that Samuel had been chosen to be a prophet of the Lord. The whole country came to recognize him as their leader and Judge, and he was the last of the Judges.

Intermediate

The emphasis with this class should be on the correspondence of “hearing” and of the three calls. The necessity for obedience and sincerity in worship has an appeal for young people, and their thought should be directed along these lines. This story of Samuel is so familiar to most Christian children that its deeper lessons are likely to be neglected.

In the book of Judges the ark and the tabernacle are not once mentioned. This, too, is natural in a time when people were looking to themselves instead of to the Lord. But with Samuel, the last

of the Judges, we suddenly return to the tabernacle.* And we find that it is still set up in Shiloh, that there is still a high priest of the line of Aaron, that the tabernacle rites are still being carried out, and that there are still some people in the land who come faithfully to the tabernacle to offer sacrifices and to worship the true God. This reminds us of the condition of the Jews hundreds of years later at the time of the Lord's birth, and there are a number of things in Samuel's story which remind us of the early years of the Lord's earthly life.

Read I Samuel 1:1-11. Verse 11 makes us think of an earlier Judge, Samson, for you remember that Samson also did not cut his hair and that his strength was in his hair. This part of Hannah's vow shows that Samuel, like Samson, was to be a Nazarite, one set apart for the service of God. In Numbers 6:1-21 we may read the laws governing one who had taken the vows of a Nazarite. Samson's strength pictures the power which comes from obedience to the commandments, for the hair represents the outmost or, in the case of a Judge or prophet, the letter of the Word. Samuel's power also came from obedience, but because his use was in the tabernacle, his strength was spiritual rather than physical, and was maintained to the end of his life; it produced results more important and far-reaching than those of Samson's physical victories. There is nothing in the story of Samson which indicates that he himself was impressed with his mission. But Samuel, even as a little child, heard the call of the Lord and gave willing obedience. To hear always means to obey.

The first high priest of the Jews was Aaron, and the high priesthood was always to go to one of his descendants. At this time the line of Aaron was being continued in Eli, and Eli himself was a

*There are many textual problems in the books of Samuel, not the least of which pertains to the worship structure. In both I Samuel 1:9 and 3:3 it is identified as a "temple" rather than a "tabernacle," whereas in I Samuel 2:22 it is clearly called a "tent." There are, indeed, so many glaring inconsistencies in the letter that the teacher would be ill-advised to overstress the literal details. –Ed.

good man. But his sons, Hophni and Phinehas, who should have been preparing to succeed him, were evil men, robbing the Lord of the offerings the people brought, and in this way discouraging the people from their worship of the Lord. Eli had been told of their misdeeds and had rebuked them, but had not the strength of mind to put a stop to their evil practices. In the same way, when we fall away from going to church and reading the Word, our religion becomes weakened and we do not take the firm steps necessary to restore it. Read the fourth chapter of I Samuel to see what happened to Eli and his sons.

Notice that in this time when the high priest was old and weak and his sons were corrupt and leading the people astray, the voice of the Lord came to a little child. Often in the Word we are told that we must become as little children. This means that when we have gone wrong through following our own ideas and desires, the first thing necessary is to return to a state of simple trust and obedience. Samuel was called three times before he recognized the voice of the Lord. The three calls picture hearing the Lord through our senses—that is, through reading the Word—with our minds, as we think about what we have read, and finally with our hearts, as we decide to obey the Lord.

Read the first verse of our chapter and then the last three verses. Samuel's simple obedience restored the connection between the Lord and the Israelites. He was the only one of the Judges to be recognized as leader by all the people, and this was because they saw that the Lord had chosen him to be a prophet. His life began a new period of unification and development for the nation.

Basic Correspondences

to hear = to obey

the hair = the outmost of life

the hair of a representative = the letter of the Word
of the Lord

Senior

A very good lesson for the Seniors is found in the effect of the sins of Eli's

sons on the people who came to worship. They need to know that what they do is important to the church as well as to themselves. They have something to uphold. And yet they should be reminded that the truly good people came to worship anyway, and that we should not let other people's weaknesses come between us and the Lord. Strength of character is in the ability to do right no matter what others around us do.

The story of Samuel is familiar to us all. It is a beautiful picture of the orderly development of life. Every child should, like Samuel, be "brought early to the tabernacle" and devoted to the service of the Lord. We do this when we bring our little children to be baptized and promise to bring them up in the Christian life. A child should be taught to perform willingly and faithfully the little services which are within his power. Then he is prepared to hear the voice of the Lord when it comes to him, and to obey it.

A number of verses in our lesson are especially noteworthy. "The word of the Lord was precious in those days; there was no open vision." Men had lost contact with the Lord through following their own ideas and desires. Eli's eyes "began to wax dim." The understanding of spiritual things was clouded. "Ere the lamp of God went out in the temple of the Lord, where the ark of God was." This would refer to the seven-branched lampstand in the Holy Place, which was supposed to be kept perpetually burning as a symbol of the presence of the Lord's truth in the mind. Its being nearly gone out pictures the fact that this connection with the Lord's truth was almost broken.

And then the Lord spoke to Samuel in the night, and Samuel, after the third call, replied, "Speak; for thy servant heareth." The three calls picture the appeal of the Lord to the three planes of our minds: the outer life, the intelligence, and finally the will. Hearing represents obedience. In the night-time of general indifference, the voice came to one willing to obey. "And Samuel lay until the morning, and opened the doors of the house of the Lord." Morning always pictures the beginning of a new spiritual state, and the opening of the doors of the house of the Lord represents the fact that through Samuel access to the Lord was once more given to the people.

We may think of Samuel as the beginning of our mature consciousness of our own weakness and need of the Lord. The first message given him was one of rebuke to Eli and his sons, which means that the first thing we must reform is our worship of the Lord. When, as young people, we have drifted away from the church and from reading the Word and praying, and have come to feel self-sufficient and to give ourselves credit for our good deeds—robbing the Lord as Hophni and Phinehas did—the Lord speaks to us through the remains of our childhood states of humility and innocence, showing us our folly and its inevitable consequences. We need to remember that the whole complex of thoughts and feelings represented by the ancient Hebrew people is present in us when we come to maturity—all the tendencies to materialism, to the worship of idols of one sort or another, to self-esteem and self-will, to profanation of holy things, to weak acquiescence in the sins of our times and companions. But Samuel is in us, too, as the voice of the Lord speaking through the Word planted in our memories in childhood. This is what we have to build on to begin the process of regeneration which is the work of our adult lives. Without this Samuel influence, the lamp of God would indeed go out in all of us.

Samuel was to be the last of the Judges, for he would anoint the first king and also the second. It is the recognition of our need to worship and obey the Lord in simple faith which leads us to adopt higher and higher principles for the guidance of our lives.

In several places in the Word Samuel is linked with Moses. Swedenborg tells us that they both represent the Word, as we know all the leaders and prophets in the Bible do. The Word is our leader, our judge, and our prophet, the voice of the Lord speaking to us. We recall that Moses in particular represents obedience to the Law in a period when obedience is a matter of duty, not of pleasure. Samuel also represents obedience, but the obedience to which we come back with all our hearts after an experience of the folly of trying to lead ourselves. Samuel was a prophet, the prophet of a transition period which introduced a development culminating in

the glory of Solomon's kingdom.

Adult

If there are parents of young children in the class, the first subject to be discussed should be the importance of bringing children up to serve the Lord. Then speak of the state into which the tabernacle worship had fallen, and call attention to its counterpart in the time of the Lord and in our own time. Finally the doctrine of remains and the necessity of simple obedience as a basis for all religious progress will make a good discussion topic. Our modern world is too much given to excusing the breaking of the commandments.

With the first book of Samuel we come to a new stage in the history of the church or of the man who is trying to live the regenerate life. The wars in the book of Judges picture various temptations which assail those who have found their homes in the Holy Land, that is, those who have become settled in the desire and practice of living according to divine law. These temptations are both external and internal and take many forms. We yield to them at first almost unconsciously and they grow upon us until we find ourselves subject to them and realize that we must ask the Lord's help in taking active measures against them. In the book of Judges the state of the people became worse and worse, until, for example, the tribe of Benjamin, which represents spiritual or interior truth, became perverted and was almost destroyed. So sometimes we allow ourselves to "backslide" through constant yielding to small or subtle temptations until we find ourselves in a bad spiritual state and almost robbed of the sense of the internal meaning of life which makes conjunction with the Lord possible. A new beginning must be made if we are to be saved. We must return for a time to a condition of simple trust and obedience and allow this to lead us to a new peak of spiritual living.

The story of the child Samuel has always been one of the best loved of the Bible stories. Parents should realize that all children are loaned to them by the Lord to prepare for His service, and should dedicate them to that service, as Hannah dedicated Samuel. And children should see in Samuel a beautiful example of simple

trust and obedience and willing service. There are also many similarities between the early life of Samuel and that of the Lord, even to the expression, “And the child Samuel grew on, and was in favor both with the Lord and also with men.” (I Samuel 2:26) Compare this with Luke 2:52.

But the story has a wider application than that to physical childhood. Our childhood states of innocence, trust, and obedience are covered up as we grow older, but they are not lost. The Lord stores them up deep within us as the “remains” of which we read in the writings. No matter how far we may have wandered from them, if we realize the barrenness of our state and look to the Lord for a new birth as Hannah did, promising new consecration, the childhood states can be revived in us and lead us to new and higher spiritual development. This is very plainly told us by the Lord when He says: “Verily, I say unto you, except ye be converted and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 18:3, 4) Samuel’s early ministry in the tabernacle is a picture of our return to a humble state of mind, in which we read the Word in simplicity, enter into the services of worship with genuine sincerity, and look to the church for guidance, as Samuel looked to Eli. Then we put ourselves in a state in which the Lord can speak to us, and prepare the way for new growth. “And Samuel grew, and the Lord was with him.”

The picture of the little Samuel is so striking and so touching that the dark background against which it stands out is often overlooked. Eli, the high priest, the descendant of Aaron, is an old man and his sight is dim. He has turned over the conduct of the tabernacle worship to his sons, Hophni and Phinehas, who are “sons of Belial” and who “knew not the Lord.” They profaned the sacrifices of the people by taking more than their due portion and by taking it even before the sacrifice was made to the Lord. “Wherefore the sin of the young men was very great before the Lord; for men abhorred the offering of the Lord.” (I Samuel 2:17)

Eli is warned by a “man of God” that the priesthood shall be taken from his house. He has remonstrated with his sons, but has not exerted himself to put a stop to their evil practices. He is therefore judged “because his sons made themselves vile, and he restrained them not.” This is a picture of a state in which worship is being degraded by being used for self-interest and self-exaltation. Although the high priest in us—the inner dictate which relates us to the Lord—sees the evil and condemns it, it does not take steps to correct it. It has become dim of sight and is no longer able to receive directly the voice of the Lord. In I Samuel 2:17, quoted above, there is the suggestion of the harm which such a state does to others as well as to ourselves. Sometimes people have been turned against the church by finding self-seeking and hypocrisy in some of its members. Our duty to keep our worship sincere and to live according to the teachings of the church is not for our own salvation alone. The Lord’s service requires of us constant watchfulness and ever-renewed devotion. We must be on our guard against the thought that we are “saved” and cannot go astray as others may. The Lord, in the letter of the Word, had promised the priesthood to Aaron and his seed forever, but the descendants of either of Aaron’s two sons, Eleazar and Ithamar, were eligible (cf. I Chronicles 24:1-3). Now the Lord takes it from the house of Eli: “I said indeed that thy house and the house of thy father, should walk before me for ever: but now the Lord saith, Be it far from me; for them that honor me I will honor, and they that despise me shall be lightly esteemed.” (I Samuel 2:30)

This degenerate state of worship is contrasted directly with the simple, obedient service of Samuel, to whom the Lord can speak. The child Samuel is called by the Lord in the night three times. The night is the state of the church at that time. Three, as we know, represents a full state in which all three planes of life are conjoined. This teaches us an important lesson. We may read the Word and take in its literal meaning through our physical senses and stop there; this is the first call—we think the message is from men. But we may go on to meditate upon it and come to see it

with our rational mind; this is the second call. We may still imagine we are merely hearing the voice of the church. It is not our will that is reached as yet. But if we hear the third call, we may then know we are hearing in the Word the voice of the Lord speaking directly to us, and that we should answer, as did Samuel, “Speak; for thy servant heareth.”

Hearing represents obedience. In the story, Samuel was given his name because his mother felt that God had heard her prayer. The name Samuel means “God hath heard.” Hearing—obedience—is the keynote of Samuel’s whole life and work. We recall that Moses also represents obedience to the law, but he is obedience in its first aspects, when it is prompted somewhat by the desire for worldly honor and rewards, and at best by a sense of duty. The Israelites have come a long way since the time of Moses. They have gained the Holy Land. But in their satisfaction with their success they have allowed themselves to forget the fundamental requirement—obedience. They had to be brought back to obedience before they could progress further. It is a lesson we all need again and again.

From the Writings of Swedenborg

Apocalypse Explained, n. 14: “To ‘hear’ is to obey and to live, because with celestial angels the things that are heard enter into the life; but as this is unknown, I would like to explain it briefly. There are two senses given to man which serve as means of receiving the things whereby the rational is formed, and also the things by which man is reformed; these are the sense of sight and the sense of hearing; the other senses are for other uses. The things that enter by the sense of sight enter into man’s understanding and enlighten it, for which reason by ‘sight’ is signified the understanding enlightened, for the understanding corresponds to the sight of the eye, as the light of heaven corresponds to the light of the world. The things, however, that enter by the sense of hearing enter both into the understanding and into the will, and for this reason by ‘the hearing’ is signified perception and obedience. Consequently, in human language, to ‘hear’ anyone, and to ‘give ear’ to anyone, also to ‘listen to,’ and ‘hearken to,’ are common expressions; and by ‘hearing any one’ is meant to perceive, and by ‘giving ear to,’ as also by ‘listening to’ is meant to obey; while ‘hearkening to’ means either perceiving or

obeying. These expressions flowed down into human language out of the spiritual world, where man's spirit is."

Suggested Questions on the Lesson

- P. Who was the last of the Judges? *Samuel*
- P. Who was the high priest in his day? *Eli*
- J. Why was Samuel brought to the tabernacle? *his mother's vow*
- P. What did he do there? *served Eli*
- J. What wrong things did Eli's sons do? *took offering for themselves*
- J. Why did not Eli make them stop? *weak*
- P. Where was Samuel when the Lord called him? *sleeping in tabernacle*
- J. What did Samuel at first think? *Eli was calling*
- P. How many times did the Lord call before Samuel learned who had called him? *three*
- P. What message for Eli did the Lord give him? *sons to lose priesthood*
- J. How did the people regard Samuel after this? *prophet*
- I. To what does hearing correspond? *obeying*
- S. Why did the Lord have to speak to Samuel three times? *appeal to three planes: outer life, intelligence, will*