

Who's the last person you had a conversation with? I imagine for a lot of you, it's someone you saw when you arrived at church today. Someone you know from church or youth group. Maybe it was just a chat with a family member, on the car ride here. Either way, probably someone you've spoken to before, and I imagine, if you step back and think about it, you usually have pretty similar conversations. You know each other, how the other person speaks, what they like to talk about, how they respond. Some conversations are shorter than others. I'm sure if you're in high school, you talk a lot longer with your friends than your parents. I had a lot more one word responses with my parents when I was in high school. How was your day? Good. What did you get up to today? Nothing much. Have you finished your homework? Soon. I'm sure not all your conversations are like some of mine were, but I do wonder, who do you talk to the most? Who do you have the longest conversations with? Let's say conversations longer than 10 minutes. Who's the last person or people you talked over ten minutes with?

Why am I asking all these questions today? We learn a lot from the people we talk to, and the things we say. Our words are a reflection of what we feel and what we think, and we can act or respond quite differently, depending on our context. Who we are with, where we are, why we are there, changes how we speak. Which leads me to my most important question. When is the last time you talked with God? Not just asked for something, or said some words. Talked. A conversation.

Let us now step into Scripture, and step backwards, back into the Old Testament, and into the book of 1 Samuel. And if you have your Bibles, you can turn there now. Where are we? We are with the nation of Israel. With Israel, you might know some of the story already. There are ups, and there are some serious downs. So where are we in Israel's history? Right now, we are past the up, of the Exodus, where God rescues His people through His servant Moses, out of slavery in Egypt. We are past the down, of 40 years aimlessly wandering in the wilderness. Then again past the up of God sending Joshua as a faithful leader of Israel, leading God's people into the Promised Land. Then into the down again, of troubles and trials in the Promised Land, because the people just refuse to faithfully trust and follow God. And when we arrive at the book of Judges, there is a constant cycle: the people suffer because of their disobedience, but God continues to be merciful, raising up judges to rescue His people. These judges however, were far from faithful or perfect leaders. And indeed, the book of Judges ends with this statement.

²⁵ In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.

It is into such a world, that the book of 1 Samuel begins. Even in the darkness, God, was working. Working to bring light once again. To bring Israel, back up. And God would do it through a judge, and prophet named Samuel. We read in chapter 3.

¹Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the LORD in the presence of Eli. And the word of the LORD was rare in those days; there was no frequent vision.

In the first two chapters of 1 Samuel, we follow two key stories. One, the story of Samuel's birth, to a faithful mother, Hannah. Samuel's birth is God's answer to Hannah's sorrowful prayers, when she hadn't borne any children. So when God answers her prayers, and gives her Samuel, she dedicates Samuel to serve God, "so that he may appear in the presence of the Lord and dwell there forever". And so Samuel, from a young age, grows up ministering and serving at the house of the Lord in Shiloh, under the priest over Israel at the time, Eli. Eli is the subject of the second key story. While Samuel's story was just beginning, God was bringing Eli's story to an end.

³¹ Behold, the days are coming when I will cut off your strength and the strength of your father's house, so that there will not be an old man in your house.

Judgment was coming upon Eli and his household. Why? Because Eli had squandered, wasted his sacred responsibility. Eli was priest and judge over God's people. Chosen to lead them. But, instead, he had chosen to honour his own sons over God. Eli's sons were worthless and wicked. We discover in chapter 2, that they ate of the sacrifices which were meant to be for the Lord, and took part in a number of terrible sins in the house of God. And Eli's attempts to rebuke them fell on deaf ears. They would not listen to their father. And so Eli had a choice. To allow his sons to continue or to honour God. And Eli made his own choice. He dishonoured God, by choosing his sons, over God. He allowed sin to continue. Sin and corruption were allowed to continue in the house of God. Eli's heart for God grew weaker and weaker, and his vision, his eyes, both physically and spiritually grew dimmer and dimmer. And Israel felt the consequences.

And the word of the LORD was rare in those days; there was no frequent vision. ² At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his own place.

Eli's condition, was a reflection of Israel's condition. A people who did not care about God. A time where there was no King in Israel. When everyone did what was right in his own eyes. And their vision, their vision of God, grew dimmer and dimmer. Led by a priest and judge who was literally going blind. The blind leading the blind. Truly, this was a dark time for Israel. Yet it was in this darkness, a flicker. Light.

³The lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the LORD, where the ark of God was.

⁴Then the LORD called Samuel, and he said, "Here I am!" ⁵and ran to Eli and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call; lie down again." So he went and lay down.

⁶And the LORD called again, "Samuel!" and Samuel arose and went to Eli and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call, my son; lie down again." ⁷Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him.

⁸And the LORD called Samuel again the third time. And he arose and went to Eli and said, "Here I am, for you called me." Then Eli perceived that the LORD was calling the boy. ⁹Therefore Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie down, and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant hears.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place.

Indeed, the lamp of God had not yet gone out. God had prepared something. Light in the darkness. For Eli, blind, old, Eli, the Lord had no more words to give, no more words to say. But for Samuel, for Samuel, as a voice in the darkness. God was speaking. And in a time and a place where the word of the Lord was rare, and slowly fading and disappearing, God had chosen for Samuel, and for Israel, to hear His voice once again.

"Then the LORD called Samuel, and he said, "Here I am!" ⁵and ran to Eli and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call; lie down again." So he went and lay down."

It was very late at night. We know this, because the lamp of God, in the temple, was lit in the evening, and lasted until the morning. Samuel was sleeping in the middle of the temple, when he heard someone calling to him. Well, there's no one else at the temple that would be calling for him this late in the evening, other than Eli. So Samuel calls out, "Here I am!" and races to Eli's side. "Here I am, for you called me".

Even in the middle of the night, Samuel jumps to attention. I can only imagine how I might react or respond to someone if they woke me up, in the dead of night, while I was trying to get some sleep. But Samuel is like a sprinter on the blocks. As soon as he hears someone calling, he shoots off to Eli's side and announces his arrival. I can only imagine how Eli may have been. Groggy, half asleep. Hey I didn't call you. Go lie down again and get some sleep.

Even here, a contrast between Samuel and Eli. Old Eli, with his fading eyes, getting older, and as we learn in the next chapter, fatter, in contrast with energised, sharp young Samuel. Under Eli's command, Samuel returns back to rest.

Samuel!

⁶ And the LORD called again, "Samuel!" and Samuel arose and went to Eli and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call, my son; lie down again." ⁷ Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him.

Once again. The same call. Someone's calling him, by name. Samuel! Now Samuel might be getting a bit confused. Samuel rises once again, and goes to Eli again. "Here I am, for you called me." But Eli responds in the same way. "I did not call, my son; lie down again."

Just what is going on? Verse 7 reveals the problem. While Samuel could hear a voice, hear words being spoken to him, Samuel did not know the one who was speaking. He did not know the Lord yet. In a time in Israel's history when the word of the Lord was rare, when no one could hear the Lord, who could still recognise His voice? Who could hear the Lord? Who could speak to Him?

Certainly not old Eli, whose vision was fading, whose ears could no longer hear, even when the Lord was calling. Instead, it was another. Samuel, who the Lord had chosen, to hear His voice. Through Samuel, Israel would hear the word of the Lord once again.

⁸ And the LORD called Samuel again the third time. And he arose and went to Eli and said, "Here I am, for you called me." Then Eli perceived that the LORD was calling the boy. ⁹ Therefore Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie down, and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant hears.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place.

Even with Eli's fading vision, he could at least see that something strange was happening. This third time, when Samuel once again appears by his side, Eli perceives that it was the Lord that was calling. And so he tells Samuel, "Go, lie down, and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant hears.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place.

There's a tragic irony here. For the priest of Israel, Eli, God had no words to share, no words to say. His time had passed. Eli had dishonoured the Lord, and his eyes and his ears continued to fade away. Instead, God was going to speak to Samuel.

¹⁰ And the LORD came and stood, calling as at other times, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant hears." ¹¹ Then the LORD said to Samuel, "Behold, I

am about to do a thing in Israel at which the two ears of everyone who hears it will tingle.

¹² On that day I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. ¹³ And I declare to him that I am about to punish his house forever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God,^[a] and he did not restrain them. ¹⁴ Therefore I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be atoned for by sacrifice or offering forever."

¹⁵ Samuel lay until morning; then he opened the doors of the house of the LORD. And Samuel was afraid to tell the vision to Eli. ¹⁶ But Eli called Samuel and said, "Samuel, my son." And he said, "Here I am." ¹⁷ And Eli said, "What was it that he told you? Do not hide it from me. May God do so to you and more also if you hide anything from me of all that he told you." ¹⁸ So Samuel told him everything and hid nothing from him. And he said, "It is the LORD. Let him do what seems good to him."

Chapter 3 of Samuel covers two stories. The beginning of one story, and the end of another. First, the joyous emergence, the start of God's plans to speak to Israel once again. In their darkness, God was bringing light. In their deafness, God was raising up a new prophet, a judge, one who could hear His voice once again. Samuel. Who's name can literally be translated as God hears. God had responded to Hannah's prayers. He was listening. Israel may have been deaf but God was not. He was always listening. It was time for unfaithful Israel to hear what God had to say once again. The beginning of Samuel's story. It was also the end of Eli's. Through Samuel, God confirms, once and for all, Eli's judgment.

¹³ And I declare to him that I am about to punish his house forever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God,^[a] and he did not restrain them. ¹⁴ Therefore I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be atoned for by sacrifice or offering forever."

For Eli, whose eyes and whose ears had grown dull. Whose heart had grown complacent, and indifferent, and uncaring. Who had chosen his sons over God. Who had misused his responsibility as priest and as judge. He could not escape the judgment of God. God had been watching. God had been listening. All the blasphemy, all the iniquity, God had seen it all. He'd heard it all. For Eli, this was God's response. These were God's words. Even as Eli's eyes grew dim, and his ears could no longer hear God's word, God was still speaking. And through Samuel, His word was returning to Israel.

There are two sides to this story. On one side, joy for all those who had been waiting, waiting for God's word and God's voice to return, to save, to restore Israel, to save it from its sin, its iniquity, its constant struggles against all the other nations in the promised land. On the other side, judgment. Judgment on the line of Eli. Judgment on all those who were unwilling to listen. Unwilling to hear. Unwilling to act. Whose hearts had grown dull towards their Lord and their God.

Eli's final response to Samuel is dull and weary. His passion for the Lord had run dry. "It is the LORD. Let him do what seems good to him."

¹⁹ And Samuel grew, and the LORD was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. ²⁰ And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba knew that Samuel was established as a prophet of the LORD. ²¹ And the LORD appeared again at Shiloh, for the LORD revealed himself to Samuel at Shiloh by the word of the LORD.

As Samuel grew, the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. As Samuel, the Lord was with him. Whenever Samuel spoke, the Lord sustained his words. Can you imagine having such a relationship with God? That was the joy and responsibility Samuel entered into. A prophet for the Lord. A prophet who the Lord spoke to. A prophet who the Lord spoke through. None of Samuel's words fell to the ground. Because God kept them up. God was by His side. God was in his words. All of Israel knew that Samuel was a prophet of the Lord. The Lord was speaking, again. The age of silence, where the word of the Lord was so rare, was over. The Lord was with Israel again.

At this point, I want to remind you about a question. It's the question I asked you at the beginning. When's the last time you talked with God? Where you spoke, and he responded? A true, genuine, real conversation?

Why? Because this entire passage, is a story about a conversation. A conversation between Samuel and God. But it's also something else. It's also a story about a missing conversation. It's also a story about a missing conversation between God and Eli.

In Samuel, we began with a young man who was yet to even know the Lord. The word of the Lord was yet to be revealed to him. But. He was a young man who was ready. Here I am. Samuel was ready to hear. He was ready to listen. Ready to receive. He was ready to hear the word of God. He was ready to hear God speak. He was ready to have a conversation with his God.

Here I am. Even when he didn't yet know the one who was calling him, he was ready. Here I am. Speak Lord, your servant hears. Samuel, was ready to talk with God. In contrast, Eli was not.

Eli. The priest, the judge, the one God had placed to care for Israel's spiritual health and the one to share God's word with God's people. Eli could no longer see. He could no longer hear. What little vision and understanding he had, was given so that soon, Samuel would take his place as judge. The 3rd time Samuel comes to him, Eli realises that God is speaking, but he also realises, that God is not speaking to him.

Doesn't this seem unfair though. What did Eli do wrong? Why won't God speak to him? Isn't it unfair? What was Eli's sin? Eli's sin. Eli's sin was that he grew comfortable. Comfortable with the sins of his sons. Comfortable with sin against God. So comfortable, that he could never be ready, ready to hear God speak. Because God was speaking. In all the sins of Israel, all the sins of Eli's sons, Eli knew what God had to say. God's attitude towards sin. That he was responsible to stop it. Eli stopped listening. He no longer was interested in hearing God's voice.

Here is the difference between him and Samuel. It is not the youth that is the difference. No. It is the heart that is the difference. A heart which was ready and willing to hear. Against a heart which wasn't interested in listening at all. Here I am! God was speaking, and Samuel was ready to listen. Eli, in contrast. He grew old, blind, indifferent. He was comfortable where he was, comfortable not hearing God's voice. He squandered his responsibilities, he dishonoured God, and misled His people. He knew that his sons continued to sin. He knew he needed to stop them. But all he could do was rebuke them, speak to them. But his words carried no weight. Because his actions carried no weight. He allowed the same mistakes to happen over and over, and stopped changing, stopped seeking, stopped seeing entirely, God's word, God's presence, God's voice. How disappointing. I'm sure glad I'm not like him, right?

When's the last time you talked with God? Had a real, genuine conversation? Where you spoke, He spoke back? Where you were ready? Ready to listen, ready to hear. Are you like Samuel, or are you like Eli? He's a bit like us, isn't he? Eli. We know certain things are right or wrong, but we do it so often that we stop caring. We stop seeking after God's voice, stop responding, stop fighting. We stop running, we stop fighting, we stop seeing, stop listening.

Why didn't God speak directly to Eli, like He did with Samuel? But, God was speaking. He was never truly silent. God only seems silent, to those who are unwilling to hear. Eli knew his sin. God was speaking to him, the entire time. He just didn't want to listen,

because he was unwilling to change. His heart valued something else more. We are just like Eli.

Why doesn't God speak directly to us? We wait for a voice, a voice out of thin air, a voice to convince us, to tell us what to do, to speak to us directly. And when we don't hear it, we blame God for being silent. Do you think that God is silent? That He doesn't hear you. That He doesn't know you. Or are we the ones unwilling to listen? When God is speaking the whole time.

Just how does God speak to us? In verse 10, the Lord came and stood, and called out to Samuel. Maybe we need to be special, like Samuel, for God to speak to us. Because, God doesn't just speak like this to anyone, right? You have to be special like Samuel. A lamp in the darkness. Maybe, it's because we aren't special, that God doesn't speak to us. God would never, come and stand with us, and call out to us, like He did with Samuel, right? Or would He. John chapter 1.

⁹The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world.

In Samuel's time, the word of God was rare. No one could hear God's word. No one could hear His voice. Israel needed Samuel. The one who was ready. Ready to hear. Ready to listen. Ready to share God's word with Israel. But in the gospel of John, we receive someone even better.

¹⁴And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

The Word of God, became flesh, and dwelt among us. We have seen his glory. The glory of the Son. The Son of God. Is God speaking to us? He most certainly is. In Hebrews 1, we read:

1 Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, **2**but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. **3**He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, **4**having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

God is speaking. He is always speaking. He is never silent. Through His Son Jesus, He has said all that He needs to say. Which is why I ask the question again.

When's the last time you talked with God? Had a conversation with Him? Is God someone you can't see, and you can't hear? Is speaking to God just like speaking into thin air? Into nothing? Are you waiting for a voice that never comes, a response that never seems to get to you?

Because God is speaking. God has spoken. But it's even better than what Samuel received. Samuel hears a voice. We see the Word of God in all his glory. Jesus, God in the flesh, came and stood right next to us. Walked side by side with us, spoke to us, died for us, rose for us, sent his Spirit to be with us forever. We saw him, we heard him, we knew him, and we get to be with him forever. And through Jesus, the Spirit of God is with us, he hears, he speaks, he sustains our life and our words. His word is with us forever.

Is God silent? Are you waiting for a voice? God is always speaking. And we see in Samuel and Eli, the difference between one who was willing to hear, and one who wasn't. So how will you respond? How do you respond when God speaks? How do you respond when God speaks through His Son?

If you are willing to hear, willing to listen, then the next step is simple. It's time to get to know your God. How do we get to know God? How do we speak to Him? He has given us His word. In both His Son and His Scripture. And just what is Scripture? It's not a rulebook or an instruction manual. It's revelation. It's the revealing of God. It is the revealing of God, through His Son, Jesus. We read the Bible, because it is here, in the word of God, that we discover the word of God become flesh. It is here we discover Jesus. This is how we get to see, get to know Him, get to hear Him, get to love Him.

God is always speaking. How do we respond? Here I am. Speak Lord, your servant hears. How might God change your life if you said those words. Are you ready to discover, to see, the word of God? Are you ready to meet Jesus, revealed to you?

Here I am, Lord.

These were the words I was praying, when I visited my family in China recently. My extended family are basically all non-Christians. Into a place and a culture, that does not know Jesus. That does not know God's word. A dark place. Yet I was armed, sustained by those words. Here I am Lord. You will speak. You are speaking. You have spoken. You will continue to speak. Make me ready, Lord, to listen.

And the Lord did indeed speak. Through these words, I discovered how faithful God really is. He responded. I got to share the gospel, share Jesus, with relatives of all

different ages, in all different situations. God took these words and told me and taught me about His faithfulness and provision. He spoke, and He challenged me to be ready to respond. How much He could change us, challenge us, speak to us, give us chances to speak, to grow, if we willingly spoke those words. So how will you respond? Like Samuel. O like Eli? Are you willing to take the risk of seeking after God, of seeing how He speaks to you, of following the one who has given His life for you? Of following Jesus, the word of God, God become flesh. God is speaking to us. We are called to be ready to listen. Here I am. Speak, Lord, for your servant hears.

When's the last time you had a conversation with God? That you talked with God? Because you can be sure about this. He has spoken. He is speaking. He is always speaking. He is never silent. We are called, like Samuel. Called to be ready. Ready to hear. Ready to trust. Ready to respond. And unlike Eli. Ready to act. Ready to change. Ready, to hear God's voice, through all the distractions, all of our treasures here on earth. Every day, every moment. God is speaking. Are you ready to listen? Are you ready to listen, in all the uncountable thoughts, conversations, choices, moments in life, during all those small uncomfortable decisions?

There is a simple prayer for you. Anytime, anywhere. Here I am, Lord. Speak Lord, for your servant hears. I'm ready. With this prayer, see just how much God can do, in you.