

Samuel — God Has Heard (1 Samuel 3:1–9) 13 September 2026 KRCN

- 1.** There was once a scholar of the Chinese classics who encountered the Bible for the first time in his life. As he carefully turned to its first chapter, something immediately caught his eye: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” He slapped his knee in amazement. He had found the answer to a question he had always wondered about: “Who is the Creator of all things?” It was God.
- 2.** In economics, such a moment might be described as the point where supply and demand meet. Those of you who trade stocks might say that a downward curve has reached its saddle point. In any case, this is how truth meets the one who has been looking for it. Perhaps something similar will happen when we come to the book of Samuel.
- 3.** There was a man named Elkanah. He had two wives, Hannah and Peninnah. Peninnah had children, but Hannah had none. Even after reading only this much, some of you may already find your ears perking up, may you not? The same may be true for those who are dissatisfied with the reality that everyone else seems to have something that they alone do not.
- 4.** People sometimes used to tell a woman in such a situation to go up to a Buddhist temple and offer prayers. The story in Samuel may not seem all that different. But what makes the book of Samuel remarkable is that the son obtained in this way is then given back to God. In other words, the point from the beginning was not that if you want to have a son, you should come to church.
- 5.** Chapter 3, which we are focusing on today, describes how Samuel, the child born in this way, is called before God. Historically, this is the moment when he takes his first step as Israel’s last judge and also as a prophet. But the question that arises here is this: “Who today would actually listen to this story?” Is there anyone who still wonders who laid the foundations of the earth?
- 6.** If you look at the beginning of chapter 3, it opens with these words: “In those days the word of the LORD was rare; there were not many visions” (1 Sam. 3:1). When a chapter of the Bible begins with words like these, it means that it is first revealing the theme of the story that is about to unfold.
- 7.** So if we read it once again with that “theme” in mind, we can quickly see that the theme is precisely “vision.” In a time when the word of the LORD was rare, visions were not often seen—“vision!” Then let us ask the question again: “Who would actually be interested in this ‘vision’?”
- 8.** Samuel was sent to Eli the priest as soon as he was weaned. His mother Hannah would therefore come from time to time to bring him a little robe. She travelled from Ramathaim

Zophim to Shiloh, because the boy Samuel and Eli the priest were living together there at the tabernacle of the LORD in Shiloh.

9. It was one night. The book of Samuel describes the scene that night in 3:2 as “Eli, whose eyes were becoming so weak that he could barely see.” And so Eli the priest, who should have been in the house of the LORD, was lying down in his own place, while the young Samuel lay down beside the ark of God instead. Nevertheless, we are told that the lamp of God had not yet gone out.

10. This can be said to portray the spiritual condition of Israel toward the end of the period of the judges. In particular, it was a time when God’s word—or visions as God’s revelation—had become rare. Human beings grew old and their strength declined, and so it was an age in which someone else had to take their place. Yet the lamp of the LORD had not gone out.

11. This describes the tension of the moment just before dawn breaks. It tells us what will eventually be left behind and what will remain when the new day finally comes. Paul said, “For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time for my departure is near” (2 Tim. 4:6). Yet the word of the LORD is always bright, like the lamps of the menorah.

12. The phrase “there were not many visions” does not mean that the oil in the lamp was running out. Rather, it means that the eyes of those who were receiving the light of that lamp had grown dim. God’s word, or His “revelation,” does not change with the passing of time. But human beings, who bear that revelation, decline in heart, grow old in body, and become dull in their thinking.

13. Turn back one chapter and look at 1 Samuel 2. Here we find the story of Eli’s two sons, Hophni and Phinehas. Who was it whose eyes had actually grown dim? It was their father, Eli. But it was his sons whose thoughts and deeds had also grown dark.

14. If you look at 2:25, when Scripture explains why they had become so darkened, it does not say that it was because their father had failed to admonish them. Rather, it says, “for it was the LORD’s will to put them to death.” It was not that visions had become scarce, nor that there was any lack of the word.

15. Ever since Adam, God has continually proclaimed the death of mankind. It is appointed for human beings to die once. So it was not simply because Hophni and Phinehas had become corrupt or lazy. Scripture says precisely that it was because God had determined to put them to death.

16. At such a time, God called Samuel. “Samuel! Samuel!” What is interesting here is that “Samuel” is his name. In 1:20, his mother Hannah names the child and explains why she gave him that name: “because I asked the LORD for him.”

17. It was Hannah who asked the LORD for a son. Yet “Samuel” means that God has heard. So when Hannah named the son she had asked for Samuel, it was a confession of faith that the One who heard her prayer was God. Hannah was the one who asked, but God was the One who heard.

18. If she had wanted to name him after the words “I asked the LORD for him,” she would have had to call him “Shaaltiu.” But the son she received in answer to that prayer was instead named “Samuel.” That is, “The One who heard is God.” “God has heard!” She changed the subject. She placed God in the position of the subject—the One at the centre of his name.

19. When we consider the very nature and existence of this child named Samuel, Hannah’s confession was this: he was the answer to the prayer I prayed, but the One who actually answered was God. This is what a proper confession of faith looks like. Even when the reality before our eyes, the history it tells, and the circumstances behind it are all plainly visible, we yield the place of the subject to God.

20. What follows is a story you know well. Three times God called Samuel. But Samuel thought that Eli the priest was calling him, so he ran to Eli’s place. The one who eventually realized that it was actually God calling Samuel was Eli, whose eyes had grown dim, after experiencing the young Samuel coming to him three times in the middle of the night.

21. When God revealed His will, He used dreams or visions. Up to that point, “visions” had been a means of God’s revelation. But as Eli’s eyes grew dim and God opened the age of Samuel, the means changed: from “vision” to “calling”! From seeing to hearing!

22. I will not say which of these is the better way. What matters is that God did it that way. It is the same as saying that Hannah was the one who prayed, but God was the One who heard. This is the answer suggested by the name “Samuel”—the answer to where we should place the centre of gravity, what we should be wondering about, and what the true subject of the story is.

23. The way people encounter God cannot be perfect from the beginning. This is because God is eternal, while human beings are limited. The infinite cannot be contained within a finite vessel. In other words, for us to receive God’s revelation, the infinite must first be reduced to the finite. For us finite beings to hear God’s calling, it is not that we must first open our ears.

24. The one who heard the sound was the young Samuel. But the one who actually recognized that the sound was God’s calling was the old Eli. He was the one who had gone back to his own

place to retire because visions had become rare. Then who was it that responded to the calling? Neither Samuel nor Eli. The true subject is the One who enables us to hear, the One who enables us to understand—the God who hears prayer.

25. So this story is not advice telling us to go up to a Buddhist temple if we cannot have a child, nor is it a lesson telling us that if we have received a calling, we must respond to it properly. Nor is it a warning not to use religion for dishonest personal gain, as Hophni and Phinehas did.

26. The theme of 1 Samuel 3 is God's revelation—"vision." What kind of vision is it? It is not a voice that I have managed to receive and hear, but a voice by which God calls. It is God's calling that continues to call to the end, even when I do not hear and even when I do not understand. It is not a son whom I obtained by praying and asking, but a son whom God heard and answered by giving. And so the theme is the faith that does not say that we obtained this "calling" through our earnest prayers and efforts, but confesses that God gave it.

27. I pray that you will be those who rise from your place at the sound of that calling. And may you respond, "Lord, here I am. Your servant is listening." And may you be those who confess, "It was not that I heard, but that the Lord called me."