

March 27

1 Samuel 3-7

Today you read I Samuel chapters 3-7. I would like to begin our talk today by thinking with you about the nature of God's call upon the life of Samuel.

I'm sure that you noticed in the very first verse that you read today, that we were told that the word of the Lord was rare, and visions were infrequent in the days of Samuel. That alerts us to the fact that what Samuel experienced was every bit as remarkable in his day as it would be in our own. It was not then common for God to speak to an individual either directly or in the form of a vision. It wasn't frequent in Moses' day, either. Remember then that it had been over 400 years since that had happened. In fact, it isn't common in any age. God can speak directly to a single individual. He has always been able to do that, and He always will be able to do that, and there is no reason to believe that tomorrow He will not choose to do it again. But that is not the norm. That is not what we are to look for or wait for. What we *can* look for is how he speaks to us through his word, through prayer, through Godly counsel and through circumstances.

It is important to note that Samuel positioned his heart in a posture to hear from God. His words, "Speak, for your servant is listening," demonstrated that he was willing, expectant, and available to hear from God. How about you? Are you listening for the voice of God in your life? Are you attentive to the Spirit's call? When was the last time you waited before God and said, "Speak, for your servant is listening"? If you haven't, you could be missing out on a very special word from the Lord.

Notice, too, that Samuel was just a kid. His heart was open to God and unencumbered by all of the skepticism and burden that often accompanies adulthood. Eli believed God was speaking to him. We should believe that God is more likely to speak to kids today too!

Moving on. In just a few short chapters we have probably covered more than 40 years of Israel's history. From the time of Eli's death on the day the Ark was captured by the Philistines, to the day it was returned by the Philistines because its very presence was literally destroying them, was about seven months. Chapter 7 tells us that a short time after the Ark came to Beth Shemesh it was carried by the Levites to Kiriath Jearim and there it stayed for 20 years.

We noted that the plague God sent among the Philistines during the period of time in which they were in possession of the Ark might well have been the Bubonic Plague, the Black Death. That conjecture rests upon the fact that the Philistines sent five golden "tumors" and five golden rats along with the Ark as a guilt offering. The golden "models" were the Philistines' way of acknowledging that the plague carried by rats and resulting in tumors was a judgment upon them by the God of Israel. Sending the Ark first to three different Philistine cities -- all of which experienced the plague -- had convinced the Philistines of the connection between

the Ark and the disease that each city experienced in turn. Even so, just to be certain that it wasn't a coincidence, the Ark was sent back to Israel, set upon a cart pulled by two unguided cows who had recently calved. If the cows ignored their own calves who were calling from a nearby pen, and walked unguided to a city of Israel, the Philistines concluded that they would know for certain that the disease and the Ark were definitely connected, and that the God of Israel had been supernaturally judging them over their capture of His Ark. The five Philistine kings apparently followed the cart all the way to Beth Shemesh, watched the sacrifice, and then returned to their cities confirmed in all of their suspicions.

If you and I had lived in Israel in the days of Samuel, I am sure that we would have been in total despair of ever seeing the Ark of God again. It had been lost in battle - a battle which had cost the lives of 30,000 Israelite soldiers. How will we ever get the Ark back? Their leaders would have asked that question over and over and the conclusion would always be the same...held in the fortified Philistine cities, protected by the conquering armies, "there isn't any way." We can't do it! And then one day the men from Beth Shemesh look up and here comes the Ark -- unattended -- on a cart with no driver, coming back all by itself! I'm pretty sure that many of the righteous warriors of Israel had spent a lot of time and energy trying to figure out how they could rescue the Ark of God from its desperate plight. What they discovered is that God's Ark didn't need rescuing. God is always perfectly capable of doing anything that needs to be done to defend His own honor and glory. He was able to bring back the Ark without any help from His pathetically weak people. When God was ready to bring the Ark home, He simply arranged the circumstances to accomplish just that! There is a very important lesson for us here. While God is sometimes pleased to allow us the privilege of being used as His instruments, He never "needs" us to rescue Him or His work. He is quite capable of accomplishing His own purposes any time He wants, any way He wants.

It was apparently 20 years after the terrible defeat of Israel that concluded Eli's life and ministry that God's people once again undertook to fight the Philistines. This time, under the direct leadership of Samuel, the battle began very differently. Instead of presumption, this time Israel showed great humility beginning with prayer, fasting, and confession of sin and of their helplessness without the help of God. Samuel, in his priestly role, offered up the sacrifice and God answered by sending thunder that threw the enemy into panic and defeat. In commemoration of the great victory Samuel set up a stone that he called "Ebenezer," which means "stone of help," because the Lord helped His people to win the battle. Next time you sing the hymn, "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing" and come to the phrase, "Here I'll raise mine Ebenezer," you will know what you are singing about!!