

1 Samuel 3.1–10

The Guided Life: following God

Amington

Sunday 30 June 2019

Listen carefully...

Who remembers Michelle Dubois? *Play 'Allo 'Allo video.*

Let's see how well you can listen. *Play video again.* Ready? I'm going to read three questions – let's see how many you get right.

Is there a law against a man marrying his widow's sister? No – there's no need for one, because he's dead (she's a *widow*).

According to international law, if an aeroplane crashes on the border between two countries, would the unidentified survivors be buried in the country they were travelling *to*, or the country they were travelling *from*? Neither – because they are *survivors*.

You are a bus driver. You drive three streets and pick up two people. You drive three more streets and one person gets off. You drive around the corner and pick up five people. How old is the bus driver? It's easy – *you* are the driver... so how old are *you*?!

I don't know if you went to Sunday school, but if you did you'll probably know this passage well – it's one of the dozen or so parts of the Old Testament that is usually taught to children. But whether or not you know it well, it's also one of those bits of the Bible that at first seems to be totally irrelevant to us.

For starters, Samuel lived in the Temple with Eli (the high priest) and his family. Despite what some children think, no-one – not even the vicar – lives in the church. (Although in this weather it might not be such a bad option!).

Samuel grew up to be one of the major figures in God's dealings with his people – he was a prophet, who led God's people for decades, has two books of the Bible named after him, and anointed not one but *two* kings. I'm certain none of us is going to do *that* – unless one of us becomes the Archbishop of Canterbury I suppose!

Then there's the way Samuel heard God speak to him in an audible voice – I suspect that's *not* something most of us have experienced, and it's the sort of thing that if we claimed we *had*, others may even suggest we see a doctor.

Except – everyone in here *has* heard God speaking to us in an audible voice. The question is – were, and are, we listening?

Paying attention (1-2)

Eli was the high priest, Israel's leader at that time – but he had failed, both as a leader and as a father. In chapter 1 he mistakes Hannah's desperate prayers for drunkenness. Chapter 2 describes how his sons acted wickedly by stealing people's sacrificial meat, and sleeping with the female servants – and when Eli confronted them about it, they ignored him.

No wonder then, that the first verse of chapter 3 says this: **in those days the word of the Lord was rare; there were not many visions.** In the Old Testament, when God withholds his **word** like this, it is a sign of judgement.

But I think there is something more subtle going on here as well – look again at verse 1, except I'll carry on reading into verse 2.

In those days the word of the Lord was rare; there were not many visions. One night Eli, whose eyes were becoming so weak that he could barely see, was lying down in his usual place.

1 Samuel 3.1b-2 (NIV)

Have you ever been reading a book, and got to the bottom of a page only to realise you've no idea what it said?

Have you ever been driving, and suddenly realise you were on auto-pilot and can't actually remember the last couple of miles?

Have you ever been sitting in church listening to a sermon, and suddenly realise you've no idea what the vicar has been saying?

There is a kind of *mindlessness* – the opposite of *mindfulness* – that means although we are physically present, we aren't engaged, we aren't focused, we aren't paying attention. We might call it 'mental drift' or 'autopilot'.

Now, we must always be careful not to read what isn't there in the Bible, but I do wonder if the writer is giving us a little hint here, by telling us **there were not many visions – Eli... could barely see.**

Eli's inability to see is irrelevant at the beginning of a passage all about *listening*, but coming after chapter 2, where Eli rebukes his sons but ends up 'looking the other way', and then verse 1, which says **there were not many visions** – I wonder if the problem wasn't so much at God's end, but at our end.

Like the words of a book, or the roads, or the vicar's sermon – those things are *there*, whether or not we are paying attention – so God's presence, his words to us, his guidance, and his leading are *there* all the time, whether or not we are paying attention.

One day an old man was walking his dog and his mule along a country lane. Suddenly a car came hurtling round the corner, knocking the man and his dog and his mule into a ditch. The case ended up in court.

The driver's defence lawyer called the old man to the witness stand. 'I want you to answer "yes" or "no" to the following question,' she said. 'Immediately after the accident, did you tell my client that you were "perfectly fine"?'

'Well,' the old man said, 'me and my dog and my mule were walking along the road...'

The lawyer interrupted him, 'Stop! "Yes" or "no": immediately after the accident, did you tell my client that you were "perfectly fine"?' The old man continued, 'Well, me and my dog and my mule were walking...'

'"Yes" or "no",' interrupted the lawyer. 'Well, me and my...'

'Stop!' said the lawyer for the third time, turning to the judge and pleading, 'Your grace, this man is not answering my question. Would you please insist that he answer the question?'

The judge replied, 'Well, he obviously wants to get something off his chest – let him speak.'

‘Well,’ said the old man,’ me and my dog and my mule were walking along the road and this car came round the corner and knocked us into a ditch. The driver stopped, got out of his car, and saw my dog was badly injured. He went back to his car, returned with a rifle, and shot my dog. He saw that my mule had broken its leg, so he shot that too. Then he turned to me and asked, “How are *you*?” and I said, “I’m perfectly fine.” ’

Listening is not easy – but so often when we think God is silent, actually the problem is at *our* end – we are spiritual blind and deaf, impatient, not paying attention. Or, we think we’ve heard what God is saying to us, when actually it is ourselves, our own wishful thinking that we are hearing.

God speaks (3-10)

Then the Lord called Samuel.

Samuel answered, ‘Here I am.’ And he ran to Eli and said, ‘Here I am; you called me.’

But Eli said, ‘I did not call; go back and lie down.’ So he went and lay down.

1 Samuel 3.4-5 (NIV)

Two more times this happened – it was night time, right before dawn (*the **lamp** burned through the night, so the fact it was nearly out means it was nearly dawn, 1*), so Eli was asleep, and probably got quite annoyed at the little boy, waking him before dawn – as if small children do that (!) – and then he **realised** God was **calling** Samuel (8).

So Eli told Samuel, ‘Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”’ So Samuel went and lay down in his place.

The Lord came and stood there, calling as at the other times, ‘Samuel! Samuel!’

Then Samuel said, ‘Speak, for your servant is listening.’

1 Samuel 3.9-10 (NIV)

This tells us three important things about God.

First, God is **patient**. The first *three times* God calls Samuel, he runs to Eli instead. But God keeps calling, ‘**Samuel, Samuel**’ until he responds, ‘**Speak, for your servant is listening**’ (10). Even when we don’t recognise his voice, even when we are not paying attention – God doesn’t give up.

Second, God **knows your name**. It is less like the television or radio – an impersonal noise we can turn on or off – and far more like a conversation with someone we love. In John 10 Jesus says, **‘I know my sheep and my sheep know me’** (John 10.14) – and that he calls his sheep **by name** (John 10.3).

Third, God **speaks**. Throughout the Bible this is given as one of the most important characteristics of God. In the beginning, God – what? Wrote a memo? Clicked his fingers? Waved a magic wand? **God said, ‘Let there be light’** (Genesis 1.3). **God said, ‘Let there be lights in the sky’** (Genesis 1.14). **God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image’** (Genesis 1.26).

How about the famous introduction to John’s gospel. **In the beginning was the – Word** (John 1.1). Elihu tells Job,

‘For God does speak – now one way, now another –
though no one perceives it.’

Job 33.14

God speaks to us – but not (usually) like I am speaking to you now. I have no way to affect your thoughts, so I have to speak, or write, or do something if I want to direct you to think about something – and of course you are (always) free to ignore me.

God, however, is able to speak *directly* to us – Christians tend to call this *guidance*.

It sounds great – and it truly is! – however the difficulty comes in discerning whether the thought that pops into our head is from God, or from ourselves.

What guidance is *not*

It's important to rule out some of the things that guidance is *not*.

How many of you have watched *Deal or no deal*? For those who haven't, there are twenty-two boxes, each of which contains a cash prize, from 1p to £250,000. The contestant chooses one at random and then, one-by-one, the other boxes are opened – once a box is open, its prize is gone.

Each time a small prize is revealed, the probability that *their* box contains a big prize increases. Throughout the game, the 'banker' rings the presenter, and makes the contestant an offer for their box. They can choose either to accept the offer, or gamble that their box contains a higher amount than the banker's offer.

John Ortberg writes:

Many people give little thought to spiritual guidance until they face a major decision: whom to marry, which house to buy, where to go to school, what job to accept? What these people really want is not guidance, in any Christian sense of the term. They want “inside information” so they will know which [box] to choose. They want to know beforehand which choice will lead to money, happiness, and success.

The Life You've Always Wanted, 148

Guidance is not about getting the inside track, peeking inside the box so we know which is the best.

But guidance is also not an excuse for being passive, or avoiding risks. Again, John Ortberg writes:

One man told me he decided not to seek a job he was interested in, on the grounds that it would be a sign of God's will if he got the job without trying. The problem with this line of reasoning is that it assumes that whatever happens as a result of [being passive] is God's will.

This is obviously not true. Try going out and sitting in the middle of [a motorway], saying, 'I'm not going to move. I'll just sit right here, and if I don't get run over by a car, then I will know it is God's doing.'

We would consider such action stupid.

The Life You've Always Wanted, 149

Listen

Guidance is not about getting insider information, nor is it about being passive or avoiding risks.

Guidance is – drum roll – *listening*.

What are Samuel's first words to God? Verse 10: **'Speak, for your servant is listening.'** Not: 'Tell me, Lord, should I do this, should I do that,' but, **'Speak, for your servant is listening.'**

So many of us struggle to hear what God is saying, not because he isn't speaking, but because *we* are – we are so busy telling God what we want him to tell us, what we want him to do, or we are so busy simply rushing around doing everything we think we need to do – we simply don't stop to *listen*.

There are three simple rules for guidance.

1. **Listen.**

Be quiet – deliberately shut yourself up, pause, take a breath, and *listen*. One wise Christian's advice was this: pray for wisdom, and use your common sense.

2. **Listen.**

The Bible is *full* of guidance – but we often ignore it because it sounds too much like hard work. Do I *really* have to be self-controlled – being greedy is so much easier! Do I *really* have to love and be kind – this person is *so* annoying! Do I *have* to be faithful and diligent in prayer – I have *so many* other things to be doing. The Bible is full of guidance – in growing in godly character and holiness. That is what God is calling you to *first*. The rest – even your job, your family, where you live – is window-dressing. Our *first* calling is to be followers of Jesus – disciples who *learn* from him – and to *learn* we need to *listen* to what he says.

3. **Listen.**

We need to learn to listen to ourselves – by which I mean noticing whether we are moving towards God, or away from him. Are we growing in faith, love, hope and peace – or in anger, self-centredness, bitterness and anxiety?

The three rules of guidance are: listen, listen, and listen.

John Ortberg writes:

God's purpose in guidance is not to get us to perform the right actions. His purpose is to help us become the right kind of people.

The Life You've Always Wanted, 150

If you find yourself constantly seeking after God for guidance in a big decision, but rarely in terms of what sort of person you are, respectfully, you have it the wrong way round – like asking for a map of Mount Snowdon, when you're actually on Ben Nevis.

God is patient. He knows we get this wrong, but he keeps calling out to us anyway.

God knows your name. He is not an impersonal force, but a loving Father who wants and knows what is best for us.

God speaks. He isn't a silent headmaster, waiting for us to slip up so he can punish us. He tells us everything we need to know, to grow in godliness and holiness, in faith, hope, love, peace and contentment – he tells us what we need to know.

The question is: are we listening?