

I Samuel 2:12-3:21 The Ministry of Younger People

Introduction

One of the blessings of life is that there are new opportunities for service at each stage of our lives. God has a plan and purpose not just for the young adults leaving school but for all of us from the youngest children in our midst to the most senior of the elderly saints in our ranks. When we read and are encouraged by the words of texts like Jeremiah 29:11-14a which states: *For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.*¹² *Then you will call on Me and come and pray to Me, and I will listen to you.*¹³ *You will seek Me and find Me when you seek Me with all your heart.*¹⁴ *I will be found by you, declares the Lord.* Until the late 1850s and the Revival that brought spiritual life and vitality to thousands of people in Scotland there was little expectation of children professing faith in their early years. It appears that it was assumed that this would occur usually in adult life although there is a lack of clarity on this subject in writings from those times. However, there are many accounts of God at work in children's lives in post Reformation Scotland. For example, in 1742 a notable time of Revival broke out in Scotland. Two ministers in parishes blessed by the awakening, James Robe of Kilsyth and William McCulloch of Cambuslang recorded the details of events that took place at the time. It was not an expected time of God breaking into the life of the nation. Things were spiritually and morally at the lowest point since the Reformation, not as bad as England before the Methodist Revival of that century, but bad enough. Social commentator Thomas Carlyle described Scotland at that time as: 'The age of lying, of sham, the fraudulent, bankrupt century, the reign of Beelzebub, the peculiar age of cant' [A dictionary definition of Cant describes it as 'hypocritical and sanctimonious talk, typically of a moral, religious, or political nature.'] (Arthur Fawcett, *The Cambuslang Revival*, p. 1) Even if Carlyle has overstated the moral decline of the nation to some degree, it was a time when a fresh encounter with the living God was needed in the land. In a sense there are some similarities with the much deeper plight of Samuel's day when God would break in to the lives of His people at that time. What was going on in Kilsyth? On 11 June 1742 James Robe wrote to a colleague in Glasgow, Rev. John MacLaurin, a letter that included these words: 'I had a closet [room] full of little ones yesternight making a pleasant noise and outcry for Christ; and two of the youngest, one of them but ten years of age, fainting and so distressed they could scarcely go home.' [Harry Sprange, *Children in Revival*, p.37] What was going on here? It was a prayer meeting of children and young people of upper Primary and early High School years praying for their own salvation and for that of other people. There were other adult prayer meetings happening, but this was exclusively a children's prayer meeting. Over the time of the Revival more than forty of them came to faith in Christ in that local community and became committed followers of Jesus from that time onwards [James Robe, *When the Wind Blows* p. 133]. In unpromising situations God can do His work through unexpected people including children. I Samuel 3 points to the extraordinary ministry of a young person. But what it ought to challenge us all to think about is this: am I limiting God as to what I could do at whatever age or stage of life I might be- if I am wholeheartedly listening to God and available to serve Him? It is not simply about using the gifts of younger members of a congregation, but that is something we must be willing to do. I am very thankful that this congregation, for example, is one that allows different people to use their gifts in leading worship services; and has embraced the need to consider different types of evening services. It is very difficult to make judgements about changes in a short space of time, but as we are open to the Lord He will direct our paths.

1. The unlikely setting of Samuel's ministry (I Samuel 2:12-36)

(a) **God was at work in an unexpected places** (I Samuel 2:12-18) *Eli's sons were scoundrels; they had no regard for the Lord.*¹³ Now it was the practice of the priests that, whenever any of the people offered a sacrifice, the priest's servant would come with a three-pronged fork in his hand while the meat was being boiled¹⁴ and would plunge the fork into the pan or kettle or cauldron or pot. Whatever the fork brought up the priest would take for himself. This is how they treated all the Israelites who came to Shiloh.¹⁵ But even before the fat was burned, the priest's servant would come and say to the person who was sacrificing, 'Give the priest some meat to roast; he won't accept boiled meat from you, but only raw.'¹⁶ If the person said to him, 'Let the fat be burned first, and then take whatever you want,' the servant would answer, 'No, hand it over now; if you don't, I'll take it by force.'¹⁷ This sin of the young men was very great in the Lord's sight, for they were treating the Lord's offering with contempt.¹⁸ **But Samuel was ministering before the Lord – a boy wearing a linen ephod.** Shiloh was the central place of worship in Israel at that time. If any venue or location in the land ought to have been the place for people living holy lives then this was it. Yet, the very opposite was true. The worst offenders were not individuals with no time for God and who had rejected His moral standards. Instead, it was the most prominent religious leaders of the nation who were most guilty of sinning against God. The words of I Samuel 2:12 take your breath away. *Eli's sons were scoundrels; they had no regard for the Lord.* Individuals with the convictions they held and the lifestyle they lived had no place leading the worship services of the people of God. Yet there were in charge year after year and facing no sanctions for their ungodly lives. What were they doing wrong? It might be easier to see if they were doing anything at all right! In this passage the focus is on their attitude towards the worshippers at the sanctuary and with respect to the offerings they gave in the sanctuary.

What did the Levitical law state should happen? Leviticus 7:28-36 states: *The Lord said to Moses,*²⁹ *'Say to the Israelites: "Anyone who brings a fellowship offering to the Lord is to bring part of it as their sacrifice to the Lord."*³⁰ *With their own hands they are to present the food offering to the Lord; they are to bring the fat, together with the breast, and wave the breast before the Lord as a wave offering.*³¹ *The priest shall burn the fat on the altar, but the breast belongs to Aaron and his sons.*³² *You are to give the right thigh of your fellowship offerings to the priest as a contribution.*³³ *The son of Aaron who offers the blood and the fat of the fellowship offering shall have the right thigh as his share.*³⁴ *From the fellowship offerings of the Israelites, I have taken the breast that is waved and the thigh that is presented and have given them to Aaron the priest and his sons as their perpetual share from the Israelites."* In simple terms the worshipper attends to the offering bringing it to the Lord, giving the fat and the breast to give to the Lord for the sacrifice, although the priests would have the breast meat to eat as a gift in kind for their acts of service. They also received *the right thigh of your fellowship offerings* (v32), presumably for another occasion. For other offerings Deuteronomy 18:3-5 reminds us of what the priests were entitled to: *This is the share due to the priests from the people who sacrifice a bull or a sheep: the shoulder, the internal organs and the meat from the head.*⁴ *You are to give them the firstfruits of your corn, new wine and olive oil, and the first wool from the shearing of your sheep,*⁵ *for the Lord your God has chosen them and their descendants out of all your tribes to stand and minister in the Lord's name always.* What was happening at Shiloh at that time? The priests or their employees would come with big forks and take whatever bit of the meat they fancied they had no intention of following the divinely laid down guidelines. Verse 15 indicates that they even on occasions demanded God's share of the sacrifice, in effect not only stealing from the worshipper but also from God! What is more, anyone who resisted such ungodly practices was threatened with violence (v16). The very serious consequences of these actions was spelt out in I Samuel 2:17: ¹⁷ *This sin of the young men was very great in the Lord's sight, for they were treating the Lord's*

offering with contempt. Their greed and arrogance was breathtaking. It was a wonder that anyone showed up to worship the Lord in such a difficult environment. Praise God for Elkanah and Hannah and others who continued to live for the Lord where He had placed them. The easiest thing would have been to walk away. The difficulties in their pathway were not used as an excuse for not doing their duties. The one who had most reason to want to quit and go home was young Samuel. I picture him being upper Primary age or at the oldest early High School age –but what did he do when this evil was going in all around him? I Samuel 2:18: *But Samuel was ministering before the Lord – a boy wearing a linen ephod.* What a witness! We would not have attached any blame to a young person walking away from such a context for their own good. Yet God had called Samuel to this work and he had embraced his calling and was living it out quietly day by day. There was no point him vocally challenging these evil men as his life might have been in serious danger. What he did most pointedly was to walk the walk of God’s way and allow the worshippers present to be encouraged that at least one person on duty at the shrine was taking God seriously. No wonder God could trust Samuel when he was older if as a young person he stood on his own for God. Samuel did what he could for God. That was all God expected from him or from us; Some years ago *Leadership*, a Christian ministry magazine, recorded the story of a B-17 bombing run over a German city during World War II. Nazi anti-aircraft fire hit the fuel tanks of the bomber, but there was no explosion. The morning after the successful raid the pilot went to the ground crew who were repairing his plane to ask for the unexploded shell from his fuel tank. He was stunned to be told there were eleven shells that had hit his fuel tank without exploding. The shells were taken away for examination and without exception were found to contain no explosive charges. Ten of the eleven were completely empty. The eleventh had a small piece of rolled up paper. It read in Czech: ‘This is all we can do for you now’. [Dale Ralph Davis, *I Samuel*, p. 25] These conscripted munitions workers could not say anything against the Nazi regime but they did what they could for the Allied War effort. We must not expect our younger members to have the maturity of their elders or to act as if they had their experience, but if they do what they can do then we will and must rejoice at that! The principle is the same for all of us. Too often we focus on what we cannot do, but God wants us to get on with what we can do. Samuel in this respect is a model for us. If he was a faithful witness in his setting then so must we be in ours.

(b) **God was good to those who trusted Him** (I Samuel 2:19-21) *Each year his mother made him a little robe and took it to him when she went up with her husband to offer the annual sacrifice.* ²⁰ *Eli would bless Elkanah and his wife, saying, ‘May the Lord give you children by this woman to take the place of the one she prayed for and gave to the Lord.’ Then they would go home.* ²¹ *And the Lord was gracious to Hannah; she gave birth to three sons and two daughters. Meanwhile, the boy Samuel grew up in the presence of the Lord.* In these three short verses the focus turns to the couple who so sacrificially gave their only child to the Lord. Hannah does what she can practically by making clothes for her son and bringing him a new set of clothes on her annual visit. It was not a dramatic spiritual action, but it was an essential practical service that needed to be done. It was an act of worship that God welcomed. It led to Eli praying prayers of blessing for them and the unexpected gifts from God that had not been sought- five extra children. For years Hannah and Elkanah knew only disappointments as the one thing they specifically sought from God was not granted. In the longer term the unexpected blessings they received were more than they had ever sought. What an encouragement this is for us. We too have our disappointments and frustrations in prayer. Lord ‘why’...? Yet in His time He will grant us unsought blessings greater than we had sought. They may be spiritual blessings rather than physical ones most of the time, but God does care

about our housing and employment needs amongst everything else and sometimes we may have material blessings too. In Matthew 19:29, in a context where Peter had informed Jesus that the disciples had given up everything to follow Him, we read these words of Jesus: *And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for My sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life.* The Christian will serve the Lord because we love Him and want to do what pleases Him –not because of any potential rewards. But the Bible is very clear that the people who put God first with genuine heartfelt devotion will be blessed by God for their commitment to Him. Be assured God knows every prayer you have prayed for the blessing of other people; every kind word or deed said or done in His name. His blessing on Elkanah and Hannah is a picture of the generous God who will bless His children in each and every generation.

(c) **God will judge those who dishonor Him** (I Samuel 2:22-26) *Now Eli, who was very old, heard about everything his sons were doing to all Israel and how they slept with the women who served at the entrance to the tent of meeting.* ²³ *So he said to them, ‘Why do you do such things? I hear from all the people about these wicked deeds of yours.* ²⁴ *No, my sons; the report I hear spreading among the Lord’s people is not good.* ²⁵ *If one person sins against another, God may mediate for the offender; but if anyone sins against the Lord, who will intercede for them?’ His sons, however, did not listen to their father’s rebuke, for it was the Lord’s will to put them to death.* ²⁶ ***And the boy Samuel continued to grow in stature and in favour with the Lord and with people.*** It is never a surprise that those who fail to uphold the doctrinal standards of God’s Word too often also breach the ethical boundaries God provides for our lives as well. God’s name was dishonoured in their acts of worship, but Eli’s sons Hophni and Phinehas, the leading priests, were also engaged in numerous sexual acts with women employed in God’s service at Shiloh. In essence it was sexual abuse of people under their care! To say they would have deserved to fail any serious PVG check is putting it mildly. Eli should have dismissed them on the spot, but he didn’t. If ever we wanted a reminder why shared collective leadership in the community of God’s people is essential this passage shows why. I thank God within our own congregation, that in addition to the Church Meeting where the major decisions are made about our collective witness are taken, we have the blessing of good men and women serving as deacons; our accountability to one another is a healthy thing. Eli needed trustworthy colleagues to stand with him when tough decisions had to be taken. He had none! Yet this section again returns to young Samuel how did he react to all the immorality around Him? I Samuel 2:26 states: *And the boy Samuel continued to grow in stature and in favour with the Lord and with people.* In matters of belief and public worship Samuel had honoured the Lord; in the face of inappropriate conduct by others around him, he continued to live the right way. The pressures at school or in your workplace are no greater than he faced –and he kept on honouring God. May we do the same!

2. **The word of the Lord had not been silenced** (I Samuel 2:27-36)

(a) **A godly rebuke** (I Samuel 2:27-29)²⁷ *Now a man of God came to Eli and said to him, ‘This is what the Lord says: “Did I not clearly reveal Myself to your ancestor’s family when they were in Egypt under Pharaoh? ²⁸ I chose your ancestor out of all the tribes of Israel to be My priest, to go up to My altar, to burn incense, and to wear an ephod in My presence. I also gave your ancestor’s family all the food offerings presented by the Israelites. ²⁹ Why do you scorn My sacrifice and offering that I prescribed for My dwelling? Why do you honour your sons more than Me by fattening yourselves on the choice parts of every offering made by My people Israel?’* Completely out of the blue it seems a devout believer showed up to pass on God’s Word. What is most important here is that God never leaves Himself

without a witness. We know absolutely nothing about this man and the circumstances in which God called him to rebuke the chief religious leader of the nation. Sometimes we need to be reminded we are not standing for God on our own. Elijah some centuries later needed to be told he was not the last believer standing in Israel- there were 7,000 other faithful Jews (I Kings 19:18). Had Eli used the excuse of so few genuine Israelite believers left that he couldn't dismiss his sons from their posts because there would be no-one to replace them? Whatever the reason he would have given it was inadequate. God does not change His principles or standards. Eli was charged with showing greater loyalty to His wicked sons than to the Lord, which would have very serious consequences for their future. This passage is a clear warning to believing parents not to be influenced by the inappropriate lifestyles of children who choose not to follow God's way. By capitulating to his offspring Eli did not do them any favours! He may have gained temporary respite from tensions in family gatherings, but long-term it was a disastrous policy. This passage is a challenge to those of us who are parents or grandparents to adult children to stand firm in our witness for core biblical principles and practices. We owe that to our children or grandchildren. Is there someone here who needs to reflect on a family situation in which they need to make different choices?

(b) **Divine judgement** (I Samuel 2:30-36)³⁰ *Therefore the Lord, the God of Israel, declares: "I promised that members of your family would minister before Me for ever." But now the Lord declares: "Far be it from Me! Those who honour Me I will honour, but those who despise Me will be disdained.* ³¹ *The time is coming when I will cut short your strength and the strength of your priestly house, so that no one in it will reach old age,* ³² *and you will see distress in My dwelling. Although good will be done to Israel, no one in your family line will ever reach old age.* ³³ *Every one of you that I do not cut off from serving at My altar I will spare only to destroy your sight and sap your strength, and all your descendants will die in the prime of life.* ³⁴ *"And what happens to your two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, will be a sign to you – they will both die on the same day.* ³⁵ ***I will raise up for myself a faithful priest, who will do according to what is in My heart and mind. I will firmly establish his priestly house, and they will minister before My anointed one always.*** ³⁶ *Then everyone left in your family line will come and bow down before him for a piece of silver and a loaf of bread and plead, 'Appoint me to some priestly office so that I can have food to eat.'*" In I Samuel 2:30-31 we read these powerful words: *Therefore the Lord, the God of Israel, declares: "I promised that members of your family would minister before Me for ever." But now the Lord declares: "Far be it from Me! **Those who honour Me I will honour, but those who despise Me will be disdained.*** Some biblical principles are laid down very clearly here. Individuals or local churches or denominations that dishonor the Lord by their departure from doctrinal standards or ethical practices will not only lose the blessing of God but face His active judgement upon them. It is not our place to set ourselves up as judge and jury over other people—that is God's work, but we must not hide how serious this issue is. Past blessings are not a guarantee of future blessing if we backslide away from the faith we professed. The very clear principle here is this: God says: ***Those who honour Me I will honour, but those who despise Me will be disdained.*** Whatever approval the secular world may give to the who depart from God's standards His Word is crystal clear about how He views such choices. The lack of evident judgement by God on wrongdoing by religious leaders (or anyone else) in this life ought not to be a cause of delight—but the very opposite. In Hebrews 12:5-8 the author was inspired to write these words: *And have you completely forgotten this word of encouragement that addresses you as a father addresses his son? It says, 'My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when He rebukes you, ⁶ because the Lord disciplines the one He loves, and He chastens everyone He accepts as His son [or daughter].'* ⁷ *Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as His children. For what children are not disciplined by their father?* ⁸ ***If you are not disciplined – and***

everyone undergoes discipline – then you are not legitimate, not true sons and daughters at all. Like me you will have heard people boasting that God has not punished them for ungodly behavior. Little do they realize what a damning indictment that is for themselves! There are contexts where it will bring tears and broken hearts to believers as we cry out to God to open the eyes of the spiritually blind and open hardened hearts to His truth.

3. The God-inspired setting of Samuel's ministry (I Samuel 3:1-21)

(a) **The plight of the people of God** (I Samuel 3:1) *The boy Samuel ministered before the Lord under Eli. In those days the word of the Lord was rare; there were not many visions. A whole generation was bypassed in terms of divine blessing here as the focus turns to this young man and His faithful service for God. No matter what choices other people made Samuel was determined to please God. What an inspiration. In the nation as a whole it was a desperate time and the small number of true believers must have been crying out: 'Lord –why don't You do something!' He was, and He did, raising up a young person to lead the nation. The cries of a godly mother's heart were heard and answered then and will be today. II Chronicles 7:14 although in geographical terms was a promise to national Israel, spiritually may be applied to every nation where God's people call on His name. If My people, who are called by My name, will humble themselves and pray and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land. God has not turned His back on this nation but He requires us as His people to cry out to Him on behalf of our nation, before His blessings will be outpoured.*

(b) **The calling of the prophet of God** (I Samuel 3:2-10) *One night Eli, whose eyes were becoming so weak that he could barely see, was lying down in his usual place. ³The lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the house of the Lord, where the ark of God was. ⁴Then the Lord called Samuel. Samuel answered, 'Here I am.' ⁵And 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. ⁶Again the Lord called, 'Samuel!' And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, 'Here I am; you called me.' 'My son,' Eli said, 'I did not call; go back and lie down.' ⁷Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord: the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. ⁸A third time the Lord called, 'Samuel!' And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, 'Here I am; you called me.' Then Eli realised that the Lord was calling the boy. ⁹So 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. ¹⁰The Lord came and stood there, calling as at the other times, 'Samuel! Samuel!' Then Samuel said, 'Speak, for Your servant is listening.' These few verses in I Samuel 3 are amongst the best known in the book, but the individual who received this revelation from God had proved themselves faithful to God first. Although still relatively young, Samuel had a single-minded focus to live for God and honour Him. Therefore, God could trust Him with greater honours and responsibilities. It is exactly the same for us today. Can God trust you and me to be faithful in the duties we have in His service? If we honour Him in them we may see a door opened to greater opportunities for service. Samuel kept persevering in His calling but also here also kept his spiritual ears open to hear God speak into that situation. The message God had for him would never have been entrusted to one who had not shown unswerving dedication to the Lord already. The calling God has for you and me will be entrusted to us as we fulfill our existing responsibilities for the Lord. Are there things you or I need to attend to in order to be more honouring to the Lord in the exercise of our calling today?*

(c) **The judgement of the priests of God** (I Samuel 3:11-21) *And the Lord said to Samuel: 'See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make the ears of everyone who hears about it tingle. ¹²At that*

time I will carry out against Eli everything I spoke against his family – from beginning to end. ¹³ For I told him that I would judge his family for ever because of the sin he knew about; his sons uttered blasphemies against God, and he failed to restrain them. ¹⁴ Therefore I swore to the house of Eli, “The guilt of Eli’s house will never be atoned for by sacrifice or offering.”’ ¹⁵ Samuel lay down until morning and then opened the doors of the house of the Lord. He was afraid to tell Eli the vision, ¹⁶ but Eli called him and said, ‘Samuel, my son.’ Samuel answered, ‘Here I am.’ ¹⁷ ‘What was it he said to you?’ Eli asked. ‘Do not hide it from me. May God deal with you, be it ever so severely, if you hide from me anything he told you.’ ¹⁸ So Samuel told him everything, hiding nothing from him. Then Eli said, ‘He is the Lord; let Him do what is good in His eyes.’ ¹⁹ The Lord was with Samuel as he grew up, and he let none of Samuel’s words fall to the ground. ²⁰ And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba recognised that Samuel was attested as a prophet of the Lord. ²¹ The Lord continued to appear at Shiloh, and there He revealed Himself to Samuel through His word. Samuel although probably having no respect for Eli’s wicked sons certainly does wish to honour this elderly servant of God. I don’t think it was just because of his office but because of all that he had genuinely sought to do for God. Samuel’s heart must have sank on hearing this message from God. Please Lord, anyone but Eli! Right from his earliest ministry for the Lord this young man was asked to do things that were exceedingly painful and costly to him. A faithful servant of the Lord then and now will have to speak words of rebuke when another brother or sister has spoken inappropriately; a loyal servant of the Lord will at times have to take action when actions take place which are utterly in breach of biblical standards. It can be the hardest and loneliest of times when these relatively rare occasions come up but with the deepest sadness in our hearts we remember God’s words here: ***Those who honour Me I will honour, but those who despise Me will be disdained*** (I Samuel 2:30). Samuel did exactly that as a younger leader who was an example to his elders not just his peers. May each of us whatever our age share the same determination he showed to honour the Lord in our generation, Amen.