

Samuel

My name is Samuel. My story is very unusual. It begins with my mother's prayers for a child and proceeds to a long career as prophet and priest. My family was not of the priestly line – actually Ephraimite, but I guess you could say I was adopted by Eli who was a hereditary priest.

I had better explain. As part of the vow my mother made to the LORD, she offered the son she prayed for – me – to be a Nazarite dedicated to lifelong service in the Temple. Interestingly, when she prayed, the priest, at first mistook her for a drunk but then asked the LORD to grant her request.

After I was born, my mother kept me at home until I was weaned but then brought me to the care of Eli. I was really little and did not understand what was going on. He was "Uncle Eli" and my mother saw me only once a year. After a while she came with other children – so I had brothers and sisters.

Things were really nice at the Temple. Uncle Eli never scolded me or told me to stop doing anything. But I was a pretty good boy. Mother had told me I was really special but was to live my life for the LORD. I also was never to cut my hair as a reminder of my mother's vow. Eli taught me to read and I studied the Law and helped around the Temple.

I read about how Moses heard from the LORD and wondered what that would be like. Then it actually happened. I was sleeping and heard a voice calling my name. I ran to Eli to ask what he wanted. He said he did not call me. But it happened again and again before he told me, "Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.'"

I did that and the LORD did speak to me. I remembered it all, even the big words, but I was afraid to tell Eli. Well, he insisted that I tell him and so I did. This is exactly what the LORD said. "See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make the ears of everyone who hears of it tingle. At that time I will carry out against Eli everything I spoke against his family—from beginning to end. For I told him that I would judge his family for ever because of the sin he knew about; his sons made themselves contemptible, and he failed to restrain them. Therefore, I swore to the house of Eli, 'The guilt of Eli's house will never be atoned for by sacrifice or offering.'"

I later found out that he already knew that. So why did the LORD give me the message? On one hand it was to prepare me for the work of speaking truth to power. But on the other hand, it was to underline the message to Eli by putting it in the mouth of a child.

As I grew up, that preparation turned out to be very important for I had many messages to deliver, some good, some not-so-good news. When it was revealed to me that Saul would come to seek me about some lost donkeys and I was to anoint him as king, it seemed a happy message. The young man looked like a king and his shy humility was a good predictor of a reign that would continue to acknowledge the LORD. I was sure wrong about that!

As time went on the danger signals multiplied and in my farewell speech, I reviewed the history of the nation, with countless episodes of falling away. I listed the benefits of having a king, mainly uniting the nation in battle, and also the dangers if they or the king disobeyed the LORD. The LORD then gave me the ability to call down a sudden storm to punctuate the message. I promised to continue praying for them, teaching them and warning them. The people heard me. King Saul heard me.

But then, almost as if on cue, Saul began to disobey the LORD. He got impatient in a battle that he probably should not have started and felt he needed a sacrifice in order to win. I was not there so he took it upon himself to assume the priestly function. I got there right after he had sinned – isn't that

the way it often is, you give in just before help arrives? I rebuked him and predicted the failure of his kingdom.

Saul's son Jonathan was an honorable man of brave and noble character. He would have made a good king. But the story of Saul just spirals downhill from there, impulsive decisions, like telling the troops to not eat before the battle was over. They got weak and then, because they were desperate with hunger, slaughtered and ate sheep and calves together with the blood. This betrayed a lack of good military common sense – Saul was “losing it,” as your language might put it.

Then, ordered to totally destroy the Amalekites, he instead kept the plunder. He denied it at first. That was one of the great “straight lines” in my career and I said, “What then is this bleating of sheep in my ears?” He countered that they were intended for sacrifice.

I said, "Let me tell you what the LORD said to me last night." "Tell me," Saul replied. And I did -- "You have rejected the word of the LORD, and the LORD has rejected you as king over Israel!" But he stayed on for years as a rejected king, a troubled and troubling man during which time I anointed his successor.

And although I am a prophet, I did not have the proper perspective when I was told to select among Jesse's sons. The first seven looked like leadership material but the message from God was clear, “The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.” God's choice was David, the youngest son, perhaps the least impressive but with a heart for God.

Many things I did not understand about the will of the LORD. Saul remained on the throne, alternatively employing David to play his harp when he needed calming and other times seeking to kill him. Saul and his men even prophesied by the power of the Spirit of God in my presence.

What was the LORD doing in all this? At my death I was still puzzled and after death was allowed to speak to Saul one more time, something that is almost never permitted. It terrified the witch who was accustomed to demonic imposters when she called up the dead! But I do know that when David was persecuted, he wrote Psalms of great spiritual depth and insight. Jonathan showed the power of godly friendship, love and loyalty to the one who had taken his own place. All these things were the plan of the LORD God of Israel.