

Listening for God

I Samuel 3:1-10

By

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To the extent possible, effort has been made to preserve the quality of the spoken word in this written adaptation.

Have you heard the hype about Tim Tebow, the quarterback for the Denver Broncos this week? How could you miss it? It was announced that Tim Tebow has become America's favorite athlete, according to those surveyed. Tom Brady, the quarterback of the Patriots (and 3 time Super Bowl Champion) took exception to the hype yesterday, and with laser precision took apart the Broncos in the playoff game in Colorado, beating them decisively 45-10. Apparently America's best quarterback is still determined on the gridiron and not in the press!

I don't often use sports illustrations but this one just seems to fit today. Tim Tebow has enjoyed a meteoric rise in the NFL, after a successful college season, and it continues in his first year as a starting quarterback in the pros. When he beat the Pittsburgh Steelers on the first play of the overtime last week, Tebow won huge acclaim as the "comeback kid." One aspect about Tebow that seemingly fascinates the press is that he is unashamedly evangelical about his Christian faith. His characteristic pose at the end of the game is down on one knee, helmet off, with his head bowed in prayer.

John Parr is an English rocker from the 80's, best known for his hit song "St. Elmo's Fire." Originally the song was written for a movie by the same name, starring Demi Moore. Parr rewrote the song (at the encouragement of ESPN) and calls it "Tim Tebow's Fire," about his miraculous come-from-behind victories.

During an interview with the former rock star, John Parr was asked if he is a fan of "Tim Tebow and the Broncos." He replied, "I'm a fan, generally, of him. I mean, it's funny. I've not seen many Broncos games. I'm definitely a Tim Tebow fan because of two things. I think he's a complete maverick, and he believes in something. I mean, everybody doesn't share his religious belief, but I think we live in a world where people have lost faith in anything. And I just like it that here is a man that believes in something, his teammates believe in him. And it just inspired me."

In every field and in every generation, there are those who come along and displace those who have come before them. Tom Brady is not yet ready to relinquish his status as the premier quarterback in the league. But it was something to see John Elway (the former Broncos quarterback and now GM) jumping up and down on the sidelines celebrating Tebow's win last week. Elway is no longer a young man and no longer on the stage quarterbacking the Broncos, Tebow is. It's not always easy to celebrate from the sidelines.

Samuel was a young man on a meteoric rise in matters of faith and worship. He had all the fundamentals, and was about to displace Eli as God's representative. Like many others, he started out naïve and innocent. In the story today, he kept hearing someone talking to him and wrongly assumed it was Eli. Eli finally realized what was going on and instructed him to listen and next time invite God to speak.

You see Eli was being replaced for cause. His sons were complete jerks, religious phonies who used their position in their father's employ for self-seeking and personal reward. The Bible calls them "scoundrels [with] no regard for the Lord or for the duties of the priests to the people." Samuel, by contrast, was pure inside and out. His mother, Hannah, had prayed for a child, and when she had Samuel, she was so grateful to the Lord that she gave him to the Temple to be raised as the servant of the Lord. While the back-story is interesting, what interests me today is that all the preparation, the belief that God can and will act, and the obedience demonstrated by Samuel and his mother Hannah, comes down to this exchange; this reversal; this replacement of Eli with Samuel.

Now I don't want to go too far here. I'm not saying that Tebow is another Samuel. There is enough hype already. But it does provide a contemporary illustration of the succession of Samuel over Eli. As others have said, "*God chooses the unlikely to accomplish the impossible*". Rarely does God choose based upon the same criteria that we might use.

Samuel himself will later choose the future king of Israel. Even his confusion is evident when he thinks the son of Jesse who looks like Tim Tebow must be the one God wants, but soon he discovers that little David, the runt of the litter is actually the one with the most heart and courage because of his faith. Even Samuel relied too heavily upon the superficial rather than substantive considerations. Surely God led him to Jesse's family because the tallest and eldest and strongest boy, Eliab was to become the next leader. The ironic twist is that God chose the one son who wasn't even there! All seven of the elder brothers were trotted out before the prophet but the one chosen by God was not among them. Little David, the youngest, was still at work shepherding the flock and was about to be anointed by Samuel as the shepherd of the people.

One cannot judge merely by the outward appearance of things. How many coaches have underestimated their opponents by misjudging the "appearance" of the other players rather than their effectiveness as a team? How many employers have overestimated the capability of an applicant? How many brides and grooms have misjudged their future spouses by too much attention to external qualities and too little attention to inner qualities? One cannot judge merely by the outward appearance.

We have an Associate Pastor Nominating Committee at work now identifying future leadership for our ministry with young families. Pray for them, that they will be able to make selections based upon inner qualities and not outward appearances.

To avoid the much more difficult and time-consuming process of careful analysis, we all rely upon snap judgments of others and preconceived categories, even prejudices, to size people up. Studies show (for example) that we tend to think more highly of physically attractive people than perhaps we should. Knowing that it is human to judge by the outward appearance, especially in the age of television, politicians are careful to portray themselves as vibrant, strong, with a good sense of humor, yet firm and resolute. And their make-up artists make an indelible impression. Politicians are not alone.

Samuel believed in something! He believed in the Lord. He had character, values, and the courage that comes from faith. Even washed up former rock stars seem attracted to those very qualities. We seem to live in a time when “the Word of the Lord is rare and visions are not widespread” too. However, those who cultivate the ability to listen can still hear God speaking. Those who believe it is worth their time and effort to listen for God, still receive guidance and direction, comfort and strength, correction and renewal.

Are you listening? Are you more confident in life because of your faith? Are you more generous? Are you engaged in trying to make a difference? Do you believe that the Lord is still capable of bringing about change in the way things are for the sake of the way things should be, so all God's people find life and opportunity?

Martin Luther King, Jr. certainly believed in something. His father was a preacher. It must have been both gratifying and difficult for the father to watch his son's meteoric rise to national stardom in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950's and 60's. Martin Luther King, Jr. believed in the Gospel, that God still intended to change things and improve the lives of all people regardless of color or race. And he believed in the Constitution of the United States when it says, “all . . . are created equal and endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, among them the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” He stood upon these two pillars, the foundational and timeless truths in the Bible and those codified the U.S. Constitution. He believed and like Samuel, he listened for a different dream, for God's dream.

Samuel and Martin Luther King, Jr. permitted their dream from God to override the realities they experienced in life, in their nations, in their churches. There is a chance for newness! God will do a new thing! But it requires us, like Hannah and Samuel, like Eli and Martin Luther King, Jr., to dare to believe in God's dream, resolving ahead of time to become available and obedient to a fresh, demanding, even dangerous new beginning.

Andrew Carnegie once said, “People are developed the same way gold is mined. When gold is mined, several tons of dirt must be moved to get an ounce of gold; but one

doesn't go into the mine looking for dirt – one goes in looking for gold.”¹ The Lord is intent upon mining for gold in the human heart. What is to be found in your heart this morning? Have you uncovered the gold or are you still shoveling dirt?

God spoke, and kept speaking several times before he finally connected with Samuel. How many times has the Lord tried to speak with you? How often has the Lord tried to confront something in you, tried to change your mind or direction, offered to comfort and hold you, but you were unwilling or unable to tune in. Maybe God is calling you to some new undertaking, to bring faith, hope, and love to someone you know, to stand up for your faith in some situation that keeps going from bad to worse? Or maybe the Lord is just tapping you on the shoulder and inviting you to slow down, turn off your email and phone and limit the distractions that occupy you from dawn to dusk everyday, inviting you to listen for a better way of living with greater sense of purpose and less anxiety.

For centuries Christians have listened for the Lord through daily reading of the Scriptures and prayer. It's remarkable how alive these words really can be. Though I'm familiar with much of Scripture, if I take the time to listen, they speak to me about things going on in my life right now. They offer a changed perspective and new insight. And I can appropriate those insights through my prayer life.

Ask the Lord to unearth some gold in your life (amidst the distractions) by setting aside some time to listen for God's invitation to believe in a different dream that the Lord may have for you. It will always include a better world for others too. Make yourself available as Samuel did and listen with an open heart and a willingness to respond. You might begin simply like Samuel, and say, “Speak Lord for your servant is listening.” Amen

¹ Maxwell, John C, *Developing The Leader Within You*, Thomas Nelson Publishing 10/4/2005