

Faithful in the Dark

1 Samuel 2:12-3:21

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10/12/2025

I begin with a personal story that quite frankly isn't easy for me to admit. Recently, I sat down with my son Jackson for a conversation, and I asked him a simple question: "Looking back at your growing up years, what could I have done better as your dad?"

What he said wasn't easy to hear.

Jackson told me that while he always knew I loved him, while we did things together and had good times, something was missing. He said he felt close to me in the things we did together, not the things we shared with each other." He couldn't remember me ever having substantial conversations with him about foundational things—about sexuality, about morality, about navigating the challenges he was facing.

But here's what hit me hardest: Jackson said he grew up watching me be a spiritual leader. He watched me shepherd the church family. But at home? That same intentional spiritual leadership was largely absent.

I couldn't disagree with him. For I had convinced myself that because I was a pastor, because I was following Christ, because I had chosen "the Christian path"—my kids would just turn out fine. It was naïve. It was wrong. And it cost my son years of the spiritual guidance he needed during the most formative time of his life.

You see, when Jackson was entering his teenage years, the smartphone had just been invented. Nobody knew what we were dealing with. I didn't realize I was handing my son 24/7 access to everything on the internet. And I didn't provide the guardrails, the boundaries, the intentional conversations he needed to navigate that world.

In other words, I failed him as a spiritual leader.

Which brings me to a question for us today: what do you do when spiritual leaders fail?

That's the question we're wrestling with this morning—and it's not just about me; it's about all of us. Because spiritual leadership fails all the time. Pastors have moral failures. Church leaders compromise. Parents abdicate their responsibility. Systems get corrupt.

What do we do when the people who are supposed to lead us spiritually . . . don't?

This morning, we're going to meet a young man who faced this exact situation—and his story is going to show us the way forward.

The Setting: When Darkness Covered God's House

Let me take you back to one of the darkest periods in Israel's history. The tabernacle still stood at Shiloh. The lamp of God still burned. The sacrifices still came. But something was terribly wrong.

The priests who were supposed to serve God were serving themselves. Hophni and Phinehas, sons of the high priest Eli, treated their sacred office like a business opportunity. When people came to offer sacrifices to the Lord—coming with humble hearts, bringing their best—these priests would send their servants with a three-pronged fork. They'd plunge it into the pot and take whatever came up. That was the custom.

But even that wasn't enough. They wanted more. Before the worshiper could even offer the fat portions to God—the part that belonged to the Lord—the priest's servant would demand raw meat. "Give it now," they'd say, "or we'll take it by force."

Can you imagine? Coming to worship God and being threatened by His priests?

It got worse. These men were sleeping with the women who served at the entrance to the tent of meeting. They were using their religious authority to exploit and abuse. They treated God's offerings with contempt. The text says their sin was "very great in the LORD's sight."

And what did their father Eli do? He was the high priest. He had the authority. He heard the reports. He even confronted them with words: "Why do you do such things? I hear from all the people about these wicked deeds of yours." But that's all he did—words. He never stopped them. He never removed them. He let it continue.

The result? Verse 1 of chapter 3 tells us: "In those days the word of the LORD was rare; there were not many visions."

Spiritual darkness. A famine of hearing from God. And it made sense, didn't it? When the priests who were supposed to mediate between God and people were corrupt, when leadership was rotten, when sin was tolerated at the highest levels—why would God speak?

The Surprise: A Boy in the Darkness

But there was someone else at Shiloh. A young boy named Samuel. His mother Hannah had prayed desperately for a son, and when God answered, she kept her promise—she gave him back to God. Year after year, she'd come to visit, bringing him a little robe she'd made with her own hands.

Samuel grew up in that corrupt environment. He slept in the tabernacle, near the ark of God. He wore the linen ephod of a priest in training. He opened the doors each morning. He tended the lamp. While Hophni and Phinehas were taking by force, Samuel was serving faithfully. While they were abusing

their position, he was doing his duties. While they were making people despise the offerings of the Lord, Samuel was growing "in stature and in favor with the LORD and with people."

Then came the night everything changed. Eli, old and nearly blind, was lying down. The lamp of God had not yet gone out. Samuel was lying down near the ark. And God called: "Samuel! Samuel!"

God did this several times and eventually Samuel answered, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

But watch what happens with Samuel. Verse 19: "The LORD was with Samuel as he grew up, and he let none of Samuel's words fall to the ground." God confirmed everything Samuel said. Verse 20: "And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba recognized that Samuel was attested as a prophet of the LORD."

The word of the Lord was rare—but not anymore. Verse 21: "The LORD continued to appear at Shiloh, and there he revealed himself to Samuel through his word."

The famine was over. God was speaking again. Not because the corrupt leadership repented. Not because the system was fixed. But because one young man remained faithful in the darkness.

That's the truth this story teaches us: **God calls us to faithfulness during times of spiritual darkness.** When leadership fails, when corruption seems to win, when the word of the Lord seems rare—God is still looking for faithful servants. He's still calling. He's still working.

But that raises the obvious question: What does that faithfulness actually look like? How do we live faithfully when we're surrounded by spiritual darkness? The story of Samuel gives us several clear answers.

Point 1:

The Story: Samuel in Eli's House

Picture young Samuel's daily life at Shiloh. Every single day, he saw what Hophni and Phinehas were doing. He heard the complaints of the worshipers. He watched them take meat by force. He knew about their sexual immorality with the women who served at the tent. He saw his mentor Eli speak words of rebuke but take no real action.

Samuel lived and worked in a thoroughly corrupt religious system.

But look at what the text tells us about Samuel. Chapter 2, verse 11: "The boy ministered before the LORD under Eli the priest." Verse 18: "Samuel was ministering before the LORD—a boy wearing a linen ephod." Verse 26: "The boy Samuel continued to grow in stature and in favor with the LORD and with people."

Notice the repetition? "Ministering... ministering... continued to grow." The Hebrew construction suggests ongoing, continuous action. This wasn't occasional service when he felt inspired. This was daily, faithful, consistent ministry.

What was he doing? The text gives us glimpses. He wore the linen ephod—the garment of priestly service. He slept near the ark of God. Chapter 3, verse 3 tells us "the lamp of God had not yet gone

out”—Samuel was the one responsible for tending it, making sure it burned from evening until morning as the law required. Verse 15: **"Samuel lay down until morning and then opened the doors of the house of the LORD."**

Every day. Same routine. Tending the lamp. Opening the doors. Doing the humble, invisible work that kept the tabernacle functioning.

And he did it all while Hophni and Phinehas were corrupting everything around him.

Here's what's remarkable: Samuel never used the corruption as an excuse. He never said, "Why should I be faithful when they're not?" He never thought, "My small service doesn't matter when the whole system is broken." He never waited for conditions to improve before he committed himself.

He just kept showing up. He kept serving. He kept doing what God had called him to do, regardless of what anyone else was doing or not doing.

The Point for Today

Faithfulness serves consistently despite surrounding corruption.

This is crucial for us to understand: Samuel didn't wait for the system to be fixed before he served faithfully. He didn't say, "I'll serve when leadership gets better." He didn't use the corruption around him as an excuse for his own compromise or complacency. He just kept serving.

Let's be honest—many of us are waiting for the "right" conditions before we fully engage in faithful service. We're waiting for our church to get it all together. We're waiting for leadership we fully agree with. We're waiting for the culture to improve. We're waiting for other Christians to be more consistent before we commit ourselves.

But faithfulness doesn't wait for perfect conditions. Faithfulness serves consistently despite the corruption, despite the compromise, despite the failure of others.

The corruption around you is not an excuse for your unfaithfulness. No amount of spiritual darkness releases you from the call to consistent, faithful service.

Here's what I want you to hear: your faithfulness matters. Even when it feels small. Even when it seems invisible. Even when no one notices. Samuel was just tending a lamp and opening doors. But God was watching. God was preparing. God was raising up the one who would speak His word to a nation.

Your consistent service in the midst of corruption isn't wasted. It's worship. It's witness. It's the exact kind of faithfulness God is looking for.

Faithfulness is consistent service despite surrounding corruption.

Point 2:

The Story: "Speak, LORD, for Your Servant Is Listening"

Now let's look at that pivotal night when everything changed for Samuel. Remember the context: "The word of the LORD was rare; there were not many visions." God had largely stopped speaking. And we know why—the corruption of Eli's house, the contempt for God's offerings, the unrestrained sin. Why would God speak when His appointed mediators refused to listen?

But that night, God spoke.

"Samuel! Samuel!"

The boy jumped up—"Here I am"—and ran to Eli. He thought Eli had called him. After all, Samuel had never heard directly from God before. Chapter 3, verse 7 is explicit: **"Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD: The word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him."**

Eli sent him back to bed. It happened again. Again Samuel ran to Eli. "Here I am; you called me."

"I did not call, my son; go back and lie down."

The third time it happened, Eli finally realized what was going on. And here's what's beautiful: the old priest may have been weak in restraining his sons, but he recognized the voice of God when he heard about it. He gave Samuel crucial instruction: "Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.'"

So Samuel went back. And when God called the fourth time—this time coming and standing there—Samuel was ready. He responded: "Speak, for your servant is listening."

Not "speak louder." Not "prove it's really you." Not "let me check my schedule." Simply: "Speak... I'm listening."

Samuel's response teaches us what listening looks like. Look at the posture here. Notice the phrase: "Your servant is listening." —the posture of a servant. There's humility in that phrase. Servants don't interrupt. They don't argue. They don't negotiate. They listen to understand what the master wants, then they do it. There's availability. There's eagerness. Samuel positioned himself not as someone who had demands to make of God, but as someone ready to receive whatever God wanted to say.

Here's what's remarkable: God spoke to Samuel precisely when everyone else had stopped listening. Hophni and Phinehas weren't listening—they ignored even their father's rebuke. Eli wasn't really listening—he heard from God through a prophet but took no action. Israel wasn't listening—the word of the Lord was rare, but there's no indication they were seeking it.

But Samuel was listening. He didn't even know it was God's voice at first, but when he learned, his response was immediate and complete: "I'm listening."

The Point for Today

Faithfulness listens carefully for God's voice.

We live in a time that's remarkably similar to Samuel's. We're drowning in religious noise—podcasts, conferences, books, social media preachers, worship music, Christian content of every kind. But how many of us are actually listening for God's voice?

Most of us are talking more than listening. We're quick to tell God what we want, what we think, what we need. But listening? Careful, attentive, submissive listening?

Think about what this means practically. It means time in Scripture isn't just an information download—it's an encounter where you're expecting to hear from God. You read slowly. You meditate. You ask, "What are You saying to me, Lord?"

It means your prayer life includes some silence. Not just you presenting your list of requests, but actual quiet where you give God space to speak to your heart.

It means when you hear a sermon or read something biblical that makes you uncomfortable, your first response isn't to critique or dismiss it, but to ask, "Is God speaking to me through this?"

It means you're teachable. Samuel needed Eli to tell him how to recognize God's voice. Who's teaching you? Are you humble enough to have mentors, even imperfect ones like Eli?

It means you're available. Samuel was lying down in the tabernacle—he was in the right place at the right time because he was faithfully serving. You can't hear God's voice if you're never in a position to listen.

Here's what I want you to understand: when the word of the Lord is rare all around you, when it seems like God has gone silent, when spiritual darkness covers everything—God is still speaking. He hasn't stopped. He's looking for someone who will say, "Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening."

The question isn't whether God is speaking. The question is whether anyone is listening.

In a time when religious leaders had stopped listening, when the priests were ignoring God's voice, when the nation had grown accustomed to silence—God found a boy who would listen. And everything changed.

Will you be that person? When everyone else is talking, will you listen? When everyone else has grown comfortable with God's silence, will you position yourself to hear? When the word of the Lord seems rare, will you be the one saying, "Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening"?

Faithfulness is careful listening for God's voice.

Point 3:

The Story: Samuel Tells Eli Everything

Let's go back to that morning after Samuel heard from God. Imagine what he's feeling. He's just had his first direct encounter with the living God—overwhelming, terrifying, awesome. And the message

God gave him? It's a death sentence for Eli's family. Everything God had previously prophesied through that unnamed man of God in chapter 2—it's all confirmed. No escape. No repentance will change it. Eli's sons will die. His family line will be cut off. The priesthood will pass to another.

Verse 15: "Samuel lay down until morning and then opened the doors of the house of the LORD." He went about his normal routine. But notice the next phrase: "He was afraid to tell Eli the vision."

Of course he was afraid! Eli had been his mentor, his father figure, his teacher. How do you look someone in the eye and say, "God is going to destroy your family"? How do you deliver that message to the most powerful religious leader in the nation?

So Samuel avoided him. He opened the doors. He busied himself with tasks. He stayed quiet.

But Eli wouldn't let him off the hook. Verse 16: "Eli called him and said, 'Samuel, my son.'"

Samuel answered, "Here I am."

"What was it he said to you?" Eli asked. "Do not hide it from me." Then Eli did something significant—he put Samuel under oath, calling down God's judgment on him if he concealed anything: "May God deal with you, be it ever so severely, if you hide from me anything he told you."

And verse 18 gives us Samuel's response: "So Samuel told him everything, hiding nothing from him."

Everything. Not the edited version. Not the softened version. Not the "let me spare your feelings" version. Everything.

The Devastating Contrast: Two Kinds of Speaking

Now let's pause here and notice the irony and contrast in this moment. Look at what's happening.

- Samuel, a young boy, had the courage to speak difficult truth to Eli.
- But Eli, the high priest and father, had never had the courage to speak difficult truth to his own sons.

Think about this contrast:

- Samuel was afraid (verse 15 says so explicitly), but he spoke anyway. His fear didn't silence him. When pressed by Eli, he delivered God's message completely—"hiding nothing from him."
- Eli, on the other hand, had spoken to his sons (we saw it back in chapter 2, verses 23-25), but his words had no force, no consequences, no follow-through. He said, "Why do you do such things? I hear from all the people about these wicked deeds of yours." He even gave them a theological lecture about sinning against God. But that's all he did—words without action, rebuke without restraint.

Chapter 3, verse 13 exposes Eli's failure with devastating clarity: **"For I told him that I would judge his family forever because of the sin he knew about; his sons blasphemed God, and he failed to restrain them."**

Let that sink in: "he failed to restrain them."

- Eli knew. He spoke. But he didn't act. He didn't remove them from office. He didn't discipline them. He didn't do what needed to be done to stop the corruption. ***His speaking was ultimately a form of silence because it changed nothing.***
- Samuel, by contrast, spoke words that cost him something—words that risked his relationship with his mentor, his position at the tabernacle, his entire future. But he spoke them because God had commanded it.

Here's the tragic contrast:

- The boy had courage the high priest lacked.
- The student did what the teacher couldn't.
- The young apprentice spoke truth that the seasoned leader had avoided for years.

What caused the difference?

The difference was that Samuel feared God more than he feared man. Yes, Samuel was somewhat afraid of Eli's reaction (3:15), but when Eli demanded the truth, Samuel's greater fear—his reverence for God—won out. He couldn't hide what God had revealed.

In contrast, Eli feared man more than he feared God. Chapter 2, verse 29 reveals God's indictment: **"Why do you honor your sons more than me?"** To be sure, Eli certainly loved his sons. He didn't want to hurt them, embarrass them, or lose his relationship with them. So what did he do? He spoke softly where God demanded he act firmly. He chose family peace over divine obedience.

And here's what we need to understand: Eli's failure to speak truth courageously to his sons didn't preserve his family—it destroyed his family. By trying to spare them difficult truth and hard consequences, he actually guaranteed their deaths and the end of his priestly line.

On the other hand, Samuel's willingness to speak truth courageously to Eli, established him as God's faithful prophet. Verse 19: **"The LORD was with Samuel as he grew up, and he let none of Samuel's words fall to the ground."**

The one who spoke courageously was confirmed by God.

The one who spoke weakly was condemned by God.

It's a devastating lesson, and here is the principle: ***How you speak truth reveals whom you ultimately fear.***

The Point for Today

Faithfulness speaks courageously even when painful.

This is where many of us fail.

- We can serve consistently—we show up, we do our duties.
- We can listen carefully—we have our devotions, we hear from God.

- But when it comes time to speak what God has shown us, especially when it's uncomfortable or costly, we suddenly develop selective muteness.

And often, like Eli, we convince ourselves that we have spoken. We've mentioned something. We've dropped hints. We've expressed concern. But speaking without acting, correcting without restraining, addressing without actually dealing with the issue—that's not courageous speaking. That's cowardly avoidance dressed up in religious language.

Samuel teaches us that faithfulness doesn't just receive God's word—it delivers God's word, even when it's painful.

Think about what Samuel risked. He risked his position at the tabernacle. He risked his relationship with Eli. He risked being labeled presumptuous, arrogant, rebellious. He risked making a powerful enemy. But when pressed, he spoke everything God had revealed.

Think about what Eli avoided. He avoided conflict with his sons. He avoided the hard conversation. He avoided disciplinary action. He avoided the risk of their anger, their rejection, their rebellion. And in avoiding the cost of speaking courageously, he ended up paying an infinitely higher cost—the destruction of his family and the judgment of God.

This contrast teaches us something crucial about courage: ***Real courage isn't the absence of fear; it's obedience despite fear.*** Samuel was terrified. But he spoke anyway. Eli may not have felt afraid—he was the high priest, after all, the one in authority. But his failure to act reveals a deeper fear: the fear of man, the fear of conflict, the fear of consequences.

Which kind of speaking does your life reflect?

Are you like Eli—speaking words without weight, addressing issues without acting on them, rebuking sin while tolerating it, choosing relationship preservation over truth-telling?

Or are you like Samuel—afraid, yes, but faithful to speak everything God has shown you, even when it costs you something?

What does courageous speaking look like practically?

1. It means when God convicts you about sin in your own life, you don't hide it—you confess it, even when it's embarrassing.
2. It means when you see sin in the church that's being tolerated, you don't just gossip about it or ignore it—you address it appropriately, following biblical patterns.
3. It means when you see your children, your friends, your fellow believers heading toward destruction, you don't just make weak suggestions or drop hints—you speak truth clearly, even if it costs you the relationship. You love them enough to risk their anger. Because Eli's story teaches us that the failure to speak courageously doesn't preserve relationships—it destroys them.
4. It means when you know God's word speaks clearly to a situation, you speak it—even if it's unpopular, even if people will be offended, even if you'll be called judgmental.

5. It means when God gives you a word for someone—a warning, an encouragement, a correction—you deliver it, even when it's awkward.

But notice something crucial: Samuel spoke when he was asked. He didn't blast the message all over Israel. He didn't announce it publicly. He told it to the person God intended to hear it—Eli—and he didn't hold back.

Courageous speaking isn't reckless speaking. It's not about being harsh or unloving. But it is about being faithful to say what God has said, even when it costs you something.

Courageous speaking is complete, costly, and consequential. Cowardly speaking is partial, comfortable, and ultimately catastrophic.

Here's what happened after Samuel spoke: God honored Samuel's faithfulness to speak. Verse 19: **"The LORD was with Samuel as he grew up, and he let none of Samuel's words fall to the ground."** God wouldn't honor Eli's speaking because Eli's words were never backed by obedience. But God would honor Samuel's speaking because Samuel's words flowed from reverence for God and faithfulness to His message.

The church desperately needs people like this today. Not people who are harsh or who love to point out others' failures. But

- people who love God and His word enough to speak it faithfully, even when it costs them something.
- People who fear God more than they fear man.
- People who would rather risk a relationship by speaking truth than preserve a relationship by tolerating sin.

We need fewer Elis—speaking without substance, correcting without restraining, addressing without acting.

We need more Samuels—afraid but faithful, young but courageous, costly but complete in their delivery of God's word.

Faithfulness speaks courageously even when painful.

CONCLUSION: The Call in the Darkness

We started today in chapter 2 with a picture of spiritual darkness—corrupt priests, tolerated sin, silent heavens. We end with a picture of light breaking through—a faithful servant, a speaking God, a restored word.

What made the difference? Not a reformation of the system. Not a cleaning up of the priesthood. Not even Eli's repentance. What made the difference was one young man who remained faithful in the darkness.

God calls us to faithfulness during times of spiritual darkness.

And we've seen what that faithfulness looks like:

Faithfulness serves consistently despite surrounding corruption.

Faithfulness listens carefully for God's voice.

Faithfulness speaks courageously even when painful.

Maybe you're in a time of spiritual darkness right now. Maybe you think your church is struggling with compromise. Maybe you have seen an entire denomination drift from truth. Maybe Christian leaders you once respected have failed morally. Maybe the culture is so hostile to the gospel that you wonder if God is even speaking anymore.

Maybe the word of the Lord seems rare.

But here's what we need to know: God is still looking for faithful servants. He's still calling. He's still working. And He doesn't need the whole system to be fixed. He just needs you to be faithful where you are.

What if you're the Samuel God wants to raise up in this dark time? What if your consistent service, your careful listening, your courageous speaking—what if that's exactly what God wants to use to bring light back into the darkness?

You and I can't control the corruption around us. You can't fix the system. I can't force revival. But you know what we can do? We can be faithful. I can tend my lamp. You can listen for God's voice. We can speak His truth.

And God promises: He'll be with you. He'll confirm your words. He'll establish your ministry. He'll use your faithfulness.

The question is: Will you be faithful in the dark?

Samuel's faithfulness didn't just change his own life. It changed a nation. When God found one person willing to serve consistently, listen carefully, and speak courageously—He used that one person to restore His word to an entire people.

Listen: Your faithfulness matters more than you think. The lamp you're tending in the darkness—God sees it. The voice you're listening for when everyone else has stopped—God will speak to you. The truth you're afraid to speak—God will honor your courage.

Be faithful in the dark. God is working. God is speaking. God is raising up light-bearers even now.

And who knows? Maybe years from now, people will look back at this dark time in the church and say, "That's when God raised up a generation of Samuels. That's when faithful servants refused to let the darkness win. That's when God spoke again."

May it start with us!

Let's pray:

Father, we confess that we've often used the spiritual darkness around us as an excuse for our own unfaithfulness. We've waited for better conditions, better leadership, better circumstances before we fully committed ourselves to You. Forgive us.

We thank You that You don't wait for perfect systems or perfect people. You just call for faithfulness. And You promise to meet us when we're faithful.

Lord, raise up Samuels in our generation. Men and women who will serve consistently despite corruption, who will listen carefully for Your voice, and who will speak courageously even when it's painful.

Let it start with us. Right here, right now. We say what Samuel said: "Speak, LORD, for Your servants are listening."

And give us the courage to speak what You reveal, even when it costs us something. Make us faithful in the dark.

In Jesus' name, Amen.