

"Samuel's Call"
1 Samuel 3:1-21

1 Now the young man Samuel was ministering to the LORD under Eli. And the word of the LORD was rare in those days; there was no frequent vision.

2 At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his own place. 3 The lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the LORD, where the ark of God was. 4 Then the LORD called Samuel, and he said, "Here I am!" 5 and ran to Eli and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call; lie down again." So he went and lay down. 6 And the LORD called again, "Samuel!" and Samuel arose and went to Eli and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call, my son; lie down again." 7 Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him. 8 And the LORD called Samuel again the third time. And he arose and went to Eli and said, "Here I am, for you called me." Then Eli perceived that the LORD was calling the young man. 9 Therefore Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie down, and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant hears.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place.

10 And the LORD came and stood, calling as at other times, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant hears." 11 Then the LORD said to Samuel, "Behold, I am about to do a thing in Israel at which the two ears of everyone who hears it will tingle. 12 On that day I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. 13 And I declare to him that I am about to punish his house forever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them. 14 Therefore I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be atoned for by sacrifice or offering forever."

15 Samuel lay until morning; then he opened the doors of the house of the LORD. And Samuel was afraid to tell the vision to Eli. 16 But Eli called Samuel and said, "Samuel, my son." And he said, "Here I am." 17 And Eli said, "What was it that he told you? Do not hide it from me. May God do so to you and more also if you hide anything from me of all that he told you." 18 So Samuel told him everything and hid nothing from him. And he said, "It is the LORD. Let him do what seems good to him."

19 And Samuel grew, and the LORD was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. 20 And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba knew that Samuel was established as a prophet of the LORD. 21 And the LORD appeared again at Shiloh, for the LORD revealed himself to Samuel at Shiloh by the word of the LORD. (ESV)

Last week we looked at God's assessment and judgment of Eli's ministry. Needless to say, it was pretty grim. Among other things, it sets the stage for Samuel's (official) call to the ministry.

This week, we'll look at three things:

- I. Samuel's Invitation (1-9)
- II. Samuel's Initiation (10-14)
- III. Samuel's Reputation (15-21)
- IV.

I. Samuel's Invitation (verses 1-9)

The first thing we notice here is the context in which Samuel's call takes place (vv. 1-3). To begin with we see that "the word of the Lord was rare, there was no frequent vision" (v. 1).¹ This is a statement, in most cases, of the Lord's displeasure with the current circumstances in Israel. They have no king, each man does what is right in his own eyes and, in a sense, part of their discipline is the Lord turning them over to themselves. The bottom line is that the spiritual atmosphere is grim.

In large part, we have to believe that this is at some level, if not completely, the result of the poor leadership of Eli's house. In both verses two and three there are double entendres that elaborate on the context. Notice verse 2, "At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his own place." What is the double entendre here? Eli has trouble seeing, not only physically, but spiritually as well. We know from what we've looked at earlier in this book and we will see from today's text that Eli is not particularly gifted with spiritual insight. Added to all this, as a side-note, notice where Eli is sleeping – in his own place (or no particular place). This will be important in distinction with where we find Samuel's bunk.

The second double entendre is in verse 3, "The lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the LORD, where the ark of God was." Where the text says, "the lamp...had not yet gone out," on one hand it simply tells us the time of day. It was nighttime. The lamp in the temple would've burned from sundown to sunset.

On the other hand, it is probably telling us something more significant. In the midst of Israel's spiritual darkness and in spite of Eli's spiritual blindness, there was still a flicker of hope – the lamp wasn't out yet! Who is that hope? Samuel, of course. Notice also, Samuel's resting place – in the temple, where the ark of God was.

This reference to the ark is significant. God commanded Moses to build an ark – the ark of the covenant. For those of you not familiar with the Bible this is completely different than the ark demanded of Noah. Noah's ark was a boat. The ark of the covenant would be more akin to a hope chest – overlaid with gold with two angels on top facing one another. Between the angels was "the mercy seat," the footstool of God's throne, and the place where it is said that Moses met with God, face to face. This, the holiest of all places, is where the young Samuel chose to rest. In other words, he "belonged" there. He didn't just do business there, he lived there.

We move from the context of Samuel's call to a statement of why it needed to take place. The statement is contained in the first two calls and then a commentary on them. Notice how the events play out. Samuel hears a voice, he obediently calls out, "Here I am." Then he runs to Eli and says, again, "Here I am, for you called me." Eli replies, "I did not call; lie down again." Samuel lies down again and the whole sequence repeats itself – lather, rinse, repeat.

In verse 7, we're given the reason why Samuel doesn't know what's happening – he did not yet know the Lord. This is also a commentary on Eli. Why? You see, Samuel was clueless because he "did not yet know the Lord." What is Eli's excuse? He has none. This is yet another testimony to his spiritual dim-sightedness.

However, by the third event, Eli starts to perceive that maybe it is the LORD. At this he gives Samuel the proper "formula" for responding to God's call. He tells him, "if he calls you, you shall say,

¹ The word "vision" here can either connote a visual or auditory encounter (or both).

‘Speak, Lord, for your servant hears.’” Now that he knows what to do, let’s look at why God is calling him.

II. Samuel’s Initiation (verses 10-14)

Let’s consider the form of God’s call in verse 10. The text says, “And the Lord came and stood, calling as at other times, ‘Samuel! Samuel!’” There are two things to notice here. The first is the word “stood.” This might lead us to wonder whether this call has taken on a visual aspect. While this could be the case, the Hebrew word used (yatsab) may also mean something like “to present oneself.”

What’s more important is the way God actually addresses Samuel. He does so in a way that only two other people, thus far in Israel’s history, had been addressed. He uses his name twice, “Samuel! Samuel!” If the purpose of this book is, among other things, to validate Samuel’s credibility as the one who will establish Israel’s monarchy, can you guess who the other two individuals called in this fashion might be? The answer, of course, is Abraham and Moses.

We find the angel of the Lord calling “Abraham! Abraham!” in Genesis 22:11. This is toward the end of Abraham’s life, but the scene is the one in which God had commanded him to sacrifice his (promised) son, Isaac. He obeys and just as he is about to plunge the knife into the heart of his son, we hear the angel of the Lord say, “‘Abraham, Abraham!’ And he said, ‘Here am I.’ He said, ‘Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.’”

We find Moses’ call in Exodus. In chapter 1, we learn of Israel’s bondage in Egypt and of a miracle baby who survives a slaughter of innocents – Moses – and is raised in Pharaoh’s household. In chapter 2, Moses kills an Egyptian taskmaster for abusing an Israelite and is forced to flee to Midian. Forty years later, we are told, after hearing the cries of Israel in Egypt, God calls Moses back to Israel. He begins the conversation in chapter 3, verse 4, by calling from the burning bush, “Moses! Moses!”

It is important to view Samuel’s call in the same light as the calls of Abraham and Moses because the prior calls were turning points or the prominent landmarks in the history of redemption. In Abraham, we are promised an heir who will bless the whole world. In Moses and the story of the Exodus, we see not only the nation formed from whom this heir would come, but we’re given the paradigm of God’s saving grace. He rescues us from bondage to sin and the devil and delivers us into the promised land (new heaven and earth). The next refinement as this plan works itself out will be a king for this nation from the line of David who sits upon the throne forever. Samuel is the one who will transition Israel into this period of redemptive history. Thus his call, like Abraham and Moses, “Samuel! Samuel!”

The reason I called this section “Samuel’s Initiation” is not because of his call, but because of the first thing he’s called to do – confirm the destruction of Eli’s house. In short, the Lord repeats the oracle he gave to “the man of God” in the last chapter with an interesting twist at the end. The last thing he says to Samuel is, “Therefore I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli’s house shall not be atoned for by sacrifice or offering forever.”

As someone who tends to emphasize God’s grace, this sentence bothered me for a bit...until I thought about it. You see, what bothered me is the fact that there seemed to be a sin here that was unforgivable. Even when you look at the Old Testament law, there are provisions specifically for the sins of the priests. Why can’t this one be forgiven? At the end of the day, the answer is pretty simple.

The reason the particular sins of Eli and his sons cannot be forgiven is because their sin is to scorn and hold with contempt the very means that God had appointed to secure the forgiveness of sins. In other words, they scorned God's sacrifice and if the whole point of the sacrifice was to secure forgiveness, they had no hope.

The same is true when we consider God's ultimate sacrifice—Jesus. You see, God is willing to forgive any and every imaginable sin—except one. That one sin that He won't and can't forgive is to scorn the means He has given to secure your forgiveness. God's perfect justice must be satisfied and at the cross He pours it onto and into His Son. In turn He offers to credit the Son with all your sins and guilt in exchange for all the Son's righteousness. The only unforgivable thing is to scorn this.

III. Samuel's Reputation (verses 15-21)

Consider, first, Samuel's justifiable fear. He's just been told this heart-breaking news about the man who raised him and seems to have treated him quite well. He's afraid to tell Eli about the vision. Eli, on the other hand, demanded that he tell him everything. He even threatened some type of curse or retribution if he didn't.

In verse 18, we see that "Samuel told him everything and hid nothing from him." In this act, we see Samuel doing, as a boy, what Eli had not been able to do—honor the Lord. Remember, Eli's primary "crime" was that he honored his sons above the Lord. We can only guess at the subjective rationale behind this, but we also know, at the end of the day, Eli had a faith problem.

He didn't believe that God would honor him or take care of him if he said and did the "hard" things required of him both as a father and a priest. Samuel, on the other hand, doesn't hold back because his fear and respect of God is greater than his fear and respect of Eli. One question for all of us to continually consider as we make our decisions from day to day, "Am I driven by my faith that God will protect me if I tell the truth/do the right thing or not?"

Interestingly, while Eli had a faith problem, ultimately he submits to God's will. While I'm not certain what that meant for his future, it is clear what it meant for Samuel's future. Here, the current spiritual leader of all Israel submits to the word of the Lord from a young man, Samuel. Because of this, Samuel's reputation grows. Notice in verse 19 the text says, "And Samuel grew, and the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground."

While we might read this line quickly, Samuel's contemporaries wouldn't have. Why? Because by letting "none of his words fall to the ground," there is no question as to whether Samuel is a true prophet. According to Deuteronomy 18, the primary test for a true prophet was whether or not his words came to pass.²

The final confirmation is seen in the universal recognition of Samuel's calling as Israel's prophet. Normally, prophets (and judges) were relatively local entities. Not so with Samuel. Notice who recognizes him as God's prophet, "All Israel, from Dan to Beersheba..." In other words, Samuel is not a local prophet with a local mission. He's a national prophet with a national mission—transitioning Israel from a loose confederation of tribes into a unified nation under a king from the line of David.

² "And if you say in your heart, 'How may we know the word that the LORD has not spoken?'— when a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word that the LORD has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously. You need not be afraid of him." (Deuteronomy 18:21-22 ESV)