Calling

God called Samuel to be a prophet.

If fifty ladies were talking in the other room, and one of them was my wife, through the cacophony of sound I am certain that I could discern which voice was my wife's. Why? Because we have been married more than three decades, and I have heard that voice virtually every day over thirty-seven years. I know her voice intimately.

It is a vital part of a person's spiritual growth to learn to recognize God's voice when He speaks. Familiarity with His voice is developed only by developing a deep and intimate relationship with Him. God is not limited in how, when, and where He speaks. He can speak through the Scripture, through a conversation with another believer, through divinely orchestrated circumstances, and everyday occurrences. In the Bible, He even opened a donkey's mouth to communicate with someone. But there are multitudes of voices out there, each calling for the person's attention. Only through familiarity with God's voice can one discern which one is God's and what He has to say.

Our passage today is usually deemed Samuel's "call" into ministry. For the first time, he heard God "calling" him into a prophetic ministry. The Old Testament describes several prophetic call accounts, descriptions of the circumstances and the event when God commissioned someone to be His prophet; for instance, Moses (Ex. 3:1–4:17), Isaiah (Isa. 6), Jeremiah (Jer. 1), and Ezekiel (Ezek. 1:1–3:15). Each call account is distinctively different because each individual was distinctively different, and their circumstances were different. However, in each instance the person was divinely commissioned with a word from God to deliver to people.

First Samuel 3 tells of a little "boy" (1 Sam. 3:1) who experienced the presence of the Lord and grew into a "prophet of the Lord" (v. 20). As a little child, Samuel "did not yet know the Lord" (v. 7) until he learned to recognize His voice, then he became renowned in all of Israel as the Lord's prophet, speaking God's word faithfully to the people.

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UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

1 Samuel 3:1-21

Displaying the skill of an artful storyteller, in chapter 2, the biblical writer expertly tells two stories at the same time, weaving them together so that the reader cannot miss the connection between the two. First, the writer describes a story of beauty and life (1 Sam. 2:19-21) contrasted with the dismal picture of corruption and death (vv. 22-26). A mother's love (v. 19) is compared to a father's sorrow (v. 22). Eli's blessing on Samuel's family (v. 20) is compared to Eli's rebuke of his own family (vv. 23-25). God's blessing of giving new life (v. 21a) is compared to God's purpose of death for Eli's sons (v. 25b). Each brief story ends with a statement about Samuel's growth (vv. 21b,26).

This is immediately followed by the account of an unnamed "man of God" who delivered to Eli a word of judgment from the Lord, listing the numerous ways that Eli and his sons had desecrated the Lord's offerings and dishonored the Lord (vv. 27-36). Eli would see the tabernacle destroyed; the members of his family, including his sons Hophni and Phinehas, would die in their prime of life; and the rest of his family would starve for food (v. 36).

God was about to bring one sad chapter in Israel's history to a close and open a new one. Eli and his family proved to be unfaithful leaders, and God was raising up a new one who would point the people in a godly direction. God had removed His hand of blessing on the corrupt spiritual leaders of the day and was about to place His hand of blessing on a godly leader. The old era was blind and cold-hearted toward the things of God, but in the person of the young boy Samuel, God was choosing a tender soul eager to hear what the Lord would have to say to him.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

A Persistent Call (1 Sam. 3:1-7)

One night as Samuel served in the temple under Eli's leadership, God called to Samuel. Hearing this, Samuel ran to Eli, responding "Here I am; you called me" (v. 5). Eli said he hadn't called him and instructed him to

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return to where he had been lying. Once again, God called Samuel who then went to the priest. Eli, once again, instructed him to return to where he had been.

VERSE 1

The boy Samuel served the LORD in Eli's presence. In those days the word of the LORD was rare and prophetic visions were not widespread.

Verses 1-3 give the setting of the story, when **Samuel** was merely a **boy.** The Hebrew word for *boy* is a general term that applies both to newborn infants (Ex. 2:6) and to young men not quite ready for marriage, around age seventeen (Gen. 37:2). As such, we do not know exactly how old Samuel was at this time, but we do know that he was a youth.

Samuel **served the LORD in Eli's presence.** Not yet being a priest, Samuel's service to the Lord was to be as Eli's faithful assistant. One may wonder how a boy from Ephraim (1 Sam. 1:1) would be able or qualified to serve in the house of the Lord, a task reserved for Levites. Probably the best answer is to realize that Levites had lived in the hill country of Ephraim since the time of Joshua (Josh. 24:33). As such, Samuel's father Elkanah was geographically an Ephraimite but genealogically a Levite.[1] With a priestly lineage (1 Chron. 6:22-28,33-38), Samuel was allowed to become a priest in training.

At that time **the word of the LORD was rare,** using the term that also means "precious" or "highly prized" because of its scarcity. **Prophetic visions** were supernatural revelations of God to the prophets (Isa. 2:1; Amos 1:1; Mic. 1:1) that the prophets would then relay to the people. Much like the prophetic word being *rare*, God's revelation to prophetic figures was **not widespread,** or were infrequent. That God would not speak regularly to His people may be a sign of His disfavor (Ps. 74:9; Lam. 2:9; Amos 8:11). From the time of Moses, the Bible mentions no prophet by name before the arrival of Samuel. Considering the lack of faithfulness to the Lord during the period of the judges, this would not be surprising. With the terms such as "word" and "speak" used repeatedly in this passage (fifteen times), this dearth of God's word to His people was about to change.

VERSE 2

One day Eli, whose eyesight was failing, was lying in his usual place.

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At this point, the old priest Eli's **eyesight was failing;** in other words, he was in the process of losing his vision. As of 4:15, Eli's eyesight was "fixed" or "immovable" to the point that he could no longer see anything. But at this point, Eli's vision was failing, thus he could still see a little, but not much. Eli was sleeping **in his usual place** or "in his room," probably a small bedroom attached to the sanctuary within easy earshot of his able assistant, Samuel.

VERSE 3

Before the lamp of God had gone out, Samuel was lying down in the temple of the LORD, where the ark of God was located.

The writer drew a distinct contrast between the situation of Eli and that of Samuel. With the loss of his eyesight, Eli's world was growing darker and darker. But for Samuel, he **was lying down in the temple of the LORD** that was **before the lamp of God had gone out.** Both Eli and Samuel were lying down, but one was in the dark and the other was in the light. The sanctuary was lit by a lamp (Ex. 27:20-21; 30:7-8; Lev. 24:1-4). The priest was to trim and refill the lamp each morning and evening. Thus, God spoke to Samuel sometime before dawn, before the priest was to refill the lamp.

Samuel *was lying down in the temple of the* LORD, **where the ark of God was located.** Lest we think that Samuel was lying down in the holy of holies right next to the ark, which was forbidden, this probably means that the temple was w*here the ark of God was located,* and Samuel slept somewhere in the sanctuary near the ark that was on the other side of the veil. As such, Samuel was in a position nearest to the ark of God, the Lord's throne. He was in the light and near God's throne.

VERSES 4-6

Then the LORD called Samuel, and he answered, "Here I am." He ran to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me." "I didn't call," Eli replied. "Go back and lie down." So he went and lay down. Once again the LORD called, "Samuel!" Samuel got up, went to Eli, and said, "Here I am; you called me." "I didn't call, my son," he replied. "Go back and lie down."

Samuel heard a voice calling him that he thought was Eli's. His response was **"Here I am,"** that has the connotation of "Yes, sir!" (GNT) or "What is it?" (NLT). In his mistakenness, the boy Samuel presented himself to Eli, ready to do Eli's bidding, "*Here I am*; **you called me."** Eli, clueless

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to what was happening, stated, **"I didn't call,"** then **"Go back and lie down."** To which Samuel obeyed. At the very least, even though Samuel did not recognize the voice as God's, Samuel displayed an eagerness to obey. At this moment the only authority figure present in his life was Eli, and Samuel was ready to respond to whatever Eli said.

The Lord called to Samuel again, to which Samuel once more presented himself to Eli. Eli assured Samuel, **"I didn't call, my son,"** using a term of extreme affection. **"Go back and lie down,"** to which Samuel immediately obeyed.

VERSE 7

Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, because the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him.

The writer lends an explanatory note of why Samuel mistook God's voice for Eli's. **Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, because the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him.** *Knowing about* the Lord and *knowing* the Lord are not the same things. All his young life up to that point, Samuel had been taught about God. But the Hebrew term for "to know" connotes far more than cognitive knowledge. It suggests an intimate personal knowledge growing from an intimate personal relationship, much as a husband and a wife "know" each other. Samuel did not yet have intimate knowledge of the Lord because this was the first time he heard God speak to him personally. This is totally understandable because as a young boy he had not yet learned to discern God's voice. Samuel followed the lead of those he trusted. But before the night was over, Samuel would *know the Lord* because God would speak to him clearly, and he would respond in obedience.

This is not the first time we have been told that someone "did not know the Lord." We are told in 2:12, "Eli's sons were wicked men; they did not respect the Lord," literally, "they did not know the Lord." In their wickedness and stubborn rebellion against the Lord and His commands, they clearly displayed that they did not have a walking relationship with the Lord. An intimate relationship with God will have a notable effect upon a person's life. Eli's sons demonstrated merely perfunctory religion with little, if any, evidence of personal fear of the Lord.

It is absolutely vital that any believer learn to hear God's voice when He calls. God is not limited in how He speaks. Sometimes He uses an audible voice, sometimes through a conversation or a sermon, sometimes God speaks through circumstances. Primarily, the main way to know His voice is to read it in His Word, the Bible. God's Word, revealed so long

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ago, is still living and active (Heb. 4:12, ESV), and He still speaks through it. God will never contradict what He has already said in His Word. The more we read Scripture, the more we are able to recognize the voice of God, however He may choose to speak.

Jesus said that the sheep know the Shepherd's voice. He calls them individually by name, and they are willing to follow Him when He calls (John 10:1-5). At the very least, every true believer heard the Savior calling them by name and saying, "Follow Me." God still speaks to His people, but many times His people are busy listening to so many other voices that God's voice gets lost in the crowd. But a true follower of Jesus desires to hear His voice regularly, gaining God's perspective on the circumstances around them.

Explore Further

Read and compare the call accounts of these prophets: Samuel (1 Sam. 3), Moses (Ex. 3:1–4:17), Isaiah (Isa. 6), and Jeremiah (Jer. 1). What similarities do you see in each of these? What distinct differences are presented between them?

An Attentive Ear (1 Sam. 3:8-10)

God called to Samuel a third time. When Samuel approached Eli, the priest finally understood that God was calling the boy. He instructed Samuel, if he heard the voice again, to say "Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening" (v. 9). When God called Samuel the fourth time, he responded as Eli had taught him. He was ready to listen.

VERSE 8

**Once again, for the third time, the LORD called Samuel.
He got up, went to Eli, and said, "Here I am; you called me."
Then Eli understood that the LORD was calling the boy.**

Through Samuel's eagerness and willingness to serve the priest Eli, Samuel demonstrated that his heart was ready to obey God's voice when He called. Up to this point, Samuel had not yet had any direct experience with God. He had no context or practice at receiving God's voice. So, **for**

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the third time, Samuel mistook the voice of God to be the voice of Eli. He **went to Eli** once more, presenting himself ready to serve. **"Here I am; you called me."** Slow to catch on, it took three interruptions for Eli to understand that Samuel may have been hearing God speak.

VERSE 9

He told Samuel, "Go and lie down. If he calls you, say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place.

For all of his faults, Eli gave Samuel good advice. **"Go and lie down. If he calls you, say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.'"** Learning to hear and understand God's voice is the point of this passage. In those days God's words were very rare, but God was about to speak and speak clearly. In his childlike faith, obedient Samuel went to lay down on his bed, waiting for the Lord to speak to him once more.

VERSE 10

The LORD came, stood there, and called as before, "Samuel, Samuel!" Samuel responded, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

Now God would appear in person to Samuel as well as call to him. We have already been told that words from God and prophetic "visions" were rare in those days (v. 1). Now, not only would Samuel learn to hear God's voice, but God gave Samuel a vision of Him as well.

When God calls a person, He calls them by name, in this case, **"Samuel, Samuel!"** God has a specific message for each specific person. Other Old Testament persons heard God calling them individually and received messages from the Lord: "Abraham, Abraham!" (Gen. 22:11), "Jacob, Jacob!" (46:2), and "Moses, Moses!" (Ex. 3:4). Samuel responded as Eli had commanded. **"Speak, for your servant is listening."**

This simple prayer is a great model for people of all ages. How many more things might we hear the Lord say to us if we would only respond to Him with listening ears and open hearts. Hearing God's voice is much like tuning into a station on the radio. Unless the right frequency is dialed, nothing will be heard. But there is no doubt when one dials onto God's wavelength. With ears ready to listen and hearts ready to respond, God has the person's full attention. The servant is ready to listen to what God has to say.

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Explore Further

Compare the accounts where God called specifically to one of His people: Abraham (Gen. 22:11), Jacob (46:2), and Moses (Ex. 3:4), with the nighttime call of Samuel in this passage. In what way(s) was each person's life about to change with this arresting call?

A Dire Message (1 Sam. 3:11-14)

God told Samuel that He was about to do something that would make everyone who heard about it shudder. God gave Samuel a prophecy against Eli and his sons. God would destroy Eli's lineage and no amount of sacrifice or offering could make atonement for the sins of Eli's family.

VERSE 11

The Lord said to Samuel, "I am about to do something in Israel that will cause everyone who hears about it to shudder."

Even at Samuel's young age, God was preparing Samuel to be His prophet, a proclaimer of God's word. The story of Samuel learning to hear God's voice so far has been beautiful and idyllic, but that is about to change drastically. The first message God would give Samuel would be one of impending judgment. **"I am about to do something in Israel,"** revealing to Samuel what He was about to do among His people, **"That will cause everyone who hears about it to shudder."** In the Old Testament, people have "tingling" or "shuddering" ears when they hear a message of God's judgment, of imminent doom (2 Kings 21:12; Jer. 19:3).

VERSE 12

On that day I will carry out against Eli everything I said about his family, from beginning to end.

For the fourth time a message of impending judgment comes upon the family of Eli (2:12-17; 2:22-25; 2:27-36). The message the unnamed man of God delivered against Eli's **family,** God was going to affirm to and through Samuel. God's judgment would be complete, **"from beginning to end."**

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VERSE 13

"I told him that I am going to judge his family forever because of the iniquity he knows about: his sons are cursing God, and he has not stopped them."

Eli is condemned for tolerating his sons' wicked behavior (see 2:29). **"I am going to judge his family forever because of the iniquity he knows about . . . and he has not stopped them."** Eli consciously failed to enforce God's law, even in his own family (Deut. 21:18-21). As such, Eli's neglect made his own sin a deliberate one.

What was the sin of Eli's sons? They were **cursing God** or "blaspheming God" (ESV, NLT, see NIV). Another group of translations states that Eli's sons "made themselves vile" (KJV) or "bringing a curse on themselves" (NASB). In the first group of translations, Eli's sons sinned against God by cursing or blaspheming Him. The second group of translations refers to what Eli's sons did to themselves; they brought a curse on themselves. Regardless, any way that they were cursing God indeed brought a curse upon themselves.

The previous chapter describes the sins of Eli's sons Hophni and Phinehas (2:12-17,27-36; see 1:3). As priests, they had already been given their prescribed portions from the fellowship offerings, the breast and right thigh of the animal (Lev. 7:28-36). Eli's sons weren't satisfied with their rightful portion but rather used their three-pronged fork and took from the offerer's portion. Besides this, the blood of the sacrifice was to be drained and the fat separated from the meat and be burned (Lev 7:31-36; 10:14-15; Num 18:18) because the fat belonged to God (Lev. 3:16), and humans could not eat it on punishment of death (7:22-25). Eli's sons were consuming the fat, and they threatened violence to get their way (1 Sam. 2:16). "So the servants' sin was very severe in the presence of the LORD, because the men treated the LORD's offering with contempt" (v. 17).

Not only were Eli's sons despising the offerings, but they were also having sexual relations with "the women who served at the entrance of the tent of meeting" (v. 22), either female staff who performed menial duties at the tabernacle (Ex. 38:8) or maybe cultic prostitutes (Hos. 4:14). Eli informed them that they were sinning against God (1 Sam. 2:23-25), but he was either unwilling or unable to control his wicked sons. Hophni and Phinehas chose their own wicked actions, and God chose not to rescue them from the consequences of their own sin.

An unnamed prophet, "a man of God" brought a message of condemnation. God had designated that the priestly office and authority given

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to Eli's ancestors was handed down to him. The priests were expected to carry out their duties faithfully, but Eli and his sons despised God's sacrifices and offerings (2:27-29). Eli's own sin was to honor his sons more than the Lord (Ex. 20:2-3). Because of their unfaithfulness, Eli and his sons would lose their priestly office, and because they had despised the Lord they in turn would be disgraced (1 Sam. 2:30).

VERSE 14

"Therefore, I have sworn to Eli's family: The iniquity of Eli's family will never be wiped out by either sacrifice or offering."

Such deliberate, defiant, and high-handed sin could not be forgiven through the sacrificial system (Num. 15:30-31). **"The iniquity of Eli's family will never be wiped out by either sacrifice or offering."** God's punishment would be so severe, it would cause the ears of everyone who heard of it to "shudder" (1 Sam. 3:11).

Eli was not only complicit in his sons' desecration of God's law and His house, but he had a solemn responsibility as their father and in his role of the high priest. God demanded of Eli that he exercise discipline over his sons to cease such sinful activity. Instead, Eli got fat off of the offerings and became blind to their activity, even when the people reported it to him. This is called "a sin of omission," failing to do the right thing, specifically an activity that one knows only too well they should perform. One may sin by performing wrongful actions, but one may also sin by not performing rightful actions. Previously, Eli's house had been promised authority "forever" (2:30), but now the same house would be punished "forever" (3:13). God's word set the standard for His servants, and His word announced the verdict of His judgment. With this heavy word, the boy Samuel was launched into his prophetic ministry.

Explore Further

Read "Sin" on pages 1477–1479 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. The sin of Eli's sons is described with the Hebrew term denoting crookedness or perverseness. How does this description of their sin shed light upon the kind of men Hophni and Phinehas were?

1. Robert D. Bergen, *1,2 Samuel*, vol. 7, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 64.

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