

Calling

GOD CALLED SAMUEL TO BE A PROPHET.

1 SAMUEL 3:1-14

It's a familiar scene: moms sitting on benches around a playground buzzing with noise and motion. Kids are sliding, swinging, playing chase, and jumping rope. One mom stands and loudly calls out her child's name. Not every child stops—only one. The one who knows that voice is his mom's and that it is time to go home.

Did one of your parents have a distinctive way of calling you that you immediately recognized? Did different tones convey different messages?

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UNDERSTAND **THE CONTEXT**

1 SAMUEL 3:1-21

Any good saga is a story of contrasts, and 1 Samuel is rich with them. Last week, we looked at the two wives of Elkanah—Hannah, who was barren, and Peninnah, who was seemingly ever-fruitful. In a few weeks, we will look at probably the best-known opposites—two whose names have become synonymous with the powerful versus the weak: David and Goliath.

Chapters 1–2 showed the contrast between two families. First was Elkanah's family, specifically Hannah, who was both righteous and humble. She dedicated her son, Samuel, to God. She made sure he was raised in the service of Eli, the high priest at the tabernacle in Shiloh. The second family was Eli's. Rather than live righteously, Eli's two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, treated the tabernacle with contempt. The writer of 1 Samuel masterfully contrasted Eli's sons with Hannah and Elkanah's with the phrase: Samuel "grew up in the presence of the LORD" (2:21b). He also "grew in stature and in favor with the LORD and with people" (v. 26). The text also says, "Samuel grew. The LORD was with him, and he fulfilled everything Samuel prophesied" (3:19).

Eli's sons were also growing—but not in favor with God and the people. Describing Hophni and Phinehas's behavior, the Scripture says, "So the servants' sin was very severe in the presence of the LORD, because the men treated the LORD's offering with contempt" (2:17). The word translated "severe" derives from the same Hebrew root meaning "grew" in the above passages.

Hannah and Elkanah's son grew in godliness. Hophni and Phinehas grew into great sinners. Eli's sons expected that they would follow in their father's role as servants in the tabernacle. That, though, would not be the case. God's message to Eli was that his "two sons Hophni and Phinehas: both of them will die on the same day" (2:34). And they did (4:11).

As you read through 1 Samuel 3:1-21, highlight the verses that show God was raising up another to serve as the priest in the place of Hophni and Phinehas. What does this teach us about God and His raising up those who are to serve Him?

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EXPLORE **THE TEXT**

A PERSISTENT CALL (1 SAM. 3:1-7)

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. 2 One day Eli, whose eyesight was failing, was lying in his usual place. 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. 4 Then the Lord called Samuel, and he answered, "Here I am." 5 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. 6 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." 7 Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, because the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him.

VERSE 1

This verse begins with a continuation of what was introduced earlier—that Samuel, from his youth, ***served the Lord*** (1 Sam. 2:11). At this point, he was still a boy; the Hebrew word does not refer to a specific age. Jewish tradition puts Samuel's age at twelve.

The phrase ***in Eli's presence*** reads in Hebrew, "to the face of Eli." Some biblical scholars have speculated that maybe Samuel worked to assist Eli in his advanced age.

In those days refers to the closing days of the period of the judges. This era began after the Israelites entered Canaan and lasted about 350 years. This verse echoes the phrase that closed the book of Judges (Judg. 21:25). Rather than seeking God and being obedient to Him, people, including Eli's sons, walked in rebellion.

VERSES 2-6

These verses provide the setting for what was about to occur. Eli, at this point, "was very old" (1 Sam. 2:22), thus his ***eyesight was failing***. He was on his way to becoming completely blind (4:15). Both Eli's physical vision and spiritual vision were dimming and practically nonexistent.

Eli was in his usual place, which had evidently also become the usual place for his young apprentice, Samuel—***in the temple***. The phrase refers to the tabernacle. This was a tent-like structure that

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had three parts. The largest area was an open courtyard that was surrounded by a curtain that stood about nine feet high. The other two parts were enclosed and covered over with fabrics and animal skins. The smaller of the two parts, "the holy of holies," contained the ***ark of God***, also called the "ark of the covenant." The ark represented the presence of God among His people. The larger of the two covered areas was known as "the holy area." A massive curtain separated these two enclosed areas.

Samuel and Eli likely slept in the holy area of the tabernacle. The ***lamp of God*** referred to a lampstand or menorah that was to burn continually. That it had not yet gone out indicated these events likely occurred just prior to dawn when the lampstand would be refilled with oil (see Lev. 24:1-4). This is the last time Scripture mentions the lampstand.

So easily we can read over verse 4 without focusing on the enormity of the statement: ***the LORD called Samuel***. The Creator of the universe was calling Samuel. Samuel heard God's voice so clearly that he responded audibly. ***Here I am,*** he replied.

Samuel heard the Lord. He assumed, however, that it was Eli's voice. The tense of five of the Hebrew verbs in verse 5 indicates the events occurred in rapid succession: ***ran***, ***said***, ***replied***, ***went***, ***lay down***. That Samuel ***ran to Eli*** indicated he believed his mentor had an urgent need.

Being persistent, God called out to Samuel again. That Samuel ***went to Eli***, rather than ran to him (1 Sam. 3:5), indicated Samuel realized Eli was not having an urgent crisis. In fact, in their time together, surely Samuel had grown accustomed to having to tend to the aging prophet regardless of the hour.

Eli called Samuel ***my son***. This was an endearing term. He had grown fond of his young apprentice. Probably as Samuel returned to his bed, both he and Eli wondered what was occurring. An explanation was likely percolating in Eli's mind; in Samuel's, not so much—yet.

VERSE 7

The narrator of the story included an explanation about why Samuel did not understand what was occurring. He ***did not yet know the LORD***. The same had been said of Eli's sons. The contrast is clear. Hophni and Phinehas did not know God; Samuel *did not yet know the* LORD. What a difference that word "yet" makes!

First Samuel 2:12 explains why Hophni and Phinehas did not know God: they were wicked. Samuel, though, was merely

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inexperienced. He had not heard God's voice until now. Receiving a divine revelation was a new experience for Samuel.

Verse 7 draws an important theological parallel. It connects knowing God with receiving His revealed word. If we want to know God better, we must spend time in His Word, meaning Scripture. The principle is true: When we get in God's Word, we find that God's Word gets in us. At that point, it becomes the well from which we draw instructions, principles, answers, and encouragement for life.

Do not miss the fact that God called young Samuel by name. These verses remind believers that God knows us personally and chooses to use His people for His plans.

How does being known by God influence your faith?

AN ATTENTIVE EAR (1 SAM. 3:8-10)

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

VERSES 8-10

Samuel had no explanation for what had been happening except that Eli must have been calling him. Eli, though, came to understand what was happening. The Lord was calling and speaking to his young protégé.

Despite Eli's personal failings as a father and priest (2:29), he could still recognize when God was at work in his midst. Why he had not recognized that earlier is unclear. Maybe he had become spiritually dull and accustomed to not hearing God's voice.

Referring to Samuel as ***the boy*** emphasizes his youth. This was not the last time God would choose someone in his youth to be involved in a sacred task: He chose David (1 Sam. 16:11-13) and Timothy (1 Tim. 4:12).

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In the previous two occurrences, Eli had simply told Samuel to "Go back and lie down" (vv. 5,6) This occurrence was different. Because Eli came to understand that Samuel was hearing the voice of God, his instructions changed.

Eli knew Samuel's ministry focus was about to change. Earlier, a man of God had come to Eli with a word of foreknowledge. His sons, Hophni and Phinehas, would not inherit the priestly role and responsibilities from their father. Instead, God was raising up another (1 Sam. 2:35). Doubtless, Eli understood God was fulfilling that promise. He knew Samuel was to be the Lord's ***servant***. He also knew that as God spoke to young Samuel, his responsibility would be to listen to what God had to say.

Notice the verbs: God ***came***, ***stood***, and ***called***. The great and almighty God of the universe came and stood near Samuel. What a demonstration of God's patience, grace, and restraint!

God called, ***Samuel, Samuel!*** This reflected how the Lord had earlier called, "Abraham, Abraham!" (Gen. 22:11); "Jacob, Jacob!" (46:2); and "Moses, Moses!" (Ex. 3:4). With each of these, God was either intervening in a current situation or preparing His servant for what was coming next.

What practices can we cultivate to help us to hear God better?

KEY DOCTRINE: *God*

To God we owe the highest love, reverence, and obedience. (See Psalm 111:10; Hebrews 12:28-29.)

A DIRE MESSAGE (1 SAM. 3:11-14)

11 The Lord said to Samuel, "I am about to do something in Israel that will cause everyone who hears about it to shudder.
12 On that day I will carry out against Eli everything I said about his family, from beginning to end. 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.
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."

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VERSES 11-12

God told Samuel He was ***about to do something in Israel***. That *something* was what the man of God had earlier told Eli (1 Sam. 2:27-36). God's actions were in response to Eli's sons desecrating the Lord's house and dishonoring the people's sacrifices.

The phrase ***everyone who hears about it*** will ***shudder*** reads in Hebrew, "both his ears will tingle." The phrase appears twice later in Scripture, as God was pronouncing His pending judgment on the nations of Israel and Judah (2 Kings 21:12; Jer. 19:3). In other words, every time the phrase appears, God pronounced His punishment due to willful and flagrant sin.

As mentioned above, what God had said about Eli's family referred to the message from the unidentified messenger in chapter 2. Here, God was reiterating that He would carry out judgment against Eli and his family.

Why was God going to carry out His judgment against Eli when ***his family,*** meaning his sons, had been the ones who behaved immorally? The reason was tied to Eli's being the high priest. As such, he was held to a higher level of spiritual responsibility.

God used the phrase, ***from beginning to end***. The *beginning* would come when Eli's two sons would die on the same day (1 Sam. 2:34; 4:10-11). The *end* referred to the fact that none of Eli's family would serve as priests in the future. The entire priestly line, which—beginning with Aaron—had previously been passed down generationally, was about to be derailed.

VERSE 13

Here, God gave a further explanation about what He meant by "from beginning to end" by focusing on the long-term outcome for Eli's family. God said that He was ***going to judge his*** (meaning Eli's) ***family forever***. The verb translated *to judge* had to do with pronouncing a sentence and punishing someone who had done wrong.

Eli knew about and had spoken to his sons about their immoral and wicked behavior (2:22-25). Their behavior, however, did not change. The fact that Hophni and Phinehas were descendants of the high priest, lived in the tabernacle, and worked with holy things did not erase or negate the effects of their behavior. Despite their proximity to holy activities, in the eyes of God, they were still cursing Him.

The phrase ***he has not stopped them*** is actually stronger in the Hebrew. It states that Eli should have made his sons weak and

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rendered them essentially powerless. He should have stripped them of their duties and positions.

VERSE 14

The Hebrew word translated ***sworn*** means to take an oath. The fact that God swore this message to Eli's family meant His words and this vow were irrevocably established. He would never go back on His word.

God's message was clear. Not even presenting a ***sacrifice or offering*** would restrain His divine judgment. While this may seem harsh, recall that Hophni and Phinehas had desecrated and stolen the sacrificial offerings that worshipers had brought to the tabernacle. The punishment was directly related to their sin.

Samuel did not want to share the Lord's message with Eli. Despite this, the young apprentice told his mentor what God had said (3:15-18). This was not going to be the last time Samuel had a challenging word from God to deliver. Faithfully, though, Samuel proclaimed God's word to His people.

When has following God required you to do a difficult thing?

BIBLE SKILL: *Create a chart to better understand a biblical concept.*

The call of God to Samuel would have major ramifications in the history of God's dealing with His chosen people. In Samuel's call can be found parallels with the calling of both Abraham and Moses. In the space below, compare the call of God to Samuel, Abraham, and Moses. What did God ask them to do? How did they respond? What significance did their response have for the people of God?

Abraham (Gen. 22:1,11-14):

Moses (Ex. 3:1-13):

Samuel (1 Sam. 3:10-21):

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APPLY THE TEXT

- Believers can be assured that God knows us personally and chooses to use His people for His plans.
- Believers should be attentive to God's call.
- God calls believers to deliver His message even when it is difficult to hear.

Looking at this story, what can Christian parents do to make sure they are handling the spiritual growth of their children well? Be ready to discuss your thoughts with your Bible study group.

What keeps us from hearing God's voice? What changes do we need to make to prepare ourselves to hear a message from God?

Memorize 1 Samuel 3:10.

Prayer Needs

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