The Prophet Is Called

Devotional Reading: 1 Thessalonians 5:11–22
Background Scripture: 1 Samuel 1:1–28; 3:1–4:1a
Today's Scripture: 1 Samuel 3:8–20

I. God Calls
1 Samuel 3:8–14

8 And the LORD called Samuel again the third time. And he arose and went to Eli, and said, Here am I; for thou didst call me. And Eli perceived that the LORD had called the child.

9 Therefore Eli said unto Samuel, Go, lie down: and it shall be, if he call thee, that thou shalt say, Speak, LORD; for thy servant heareth. So Samuel went and lay down in his place.

10 And the LORD came, and stood, and called as at other times, Samuel, Samuel. Then Samuel answered, Speak; for thy servant heareth.

11 And the LORD said to Samuel, Behold, I will do a thing in Israel, at which both the ears of every one that heareth it shall tingle.

12 In that day I will perform against Eli all things which I have spoken concerning his house: when I begin, I will also make an end.

13 For I have told him that I will judge his house for ever for the iniquity which he knoweth; because his sons made themselves vile, and he restrained them not.

14 And therefore I have sworn unto the house of Eli, that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be purged with sacrifice nor offering for ever.

8. Repetition indicates importance—one is to pay attention. For *the third time* this night, Samuel rises from a place close to the ark of the covenant. He navigates through the tabernacle to Eli's usual sleeping quarters. After this third disruption to his sleep, Eli finally discerns who is calling Samuel. Imagine Samuel's bewilderment, waking up repeatedly because an unknown person calls his name!

Samuel is still a *child*. The Hebrew word here refers to a preadolescent. Samuel's experience of God is limited to what Eli has taught him.

9. Eli, an experienced priest, instructs Samuel to return to bed. He coaches Samuel through his response to God's presence. Samuel returns to an inner area of the tabernacle. It may be where Samuel regularly slept, but it is also possible that Samuel was practicing "incubation." Incubation involves spending the night in a temple or holy space in hopes of experiencing a divine dream or vision. Many ancient Near Eastern cultures practiced it—Egyptians, Hittites, Canaanites, and Israelites—but Samuel's lack of understanding when the Lord calls him indicates an unexpected experience. The name *Samuel* means "God hears" or "God asks" (1 Samuel 1:20); we see the latter happening here.

10a. The fourth call from *the Lord*

comes with a visitation. Previously, God had only called out to Samuel. This time, two additional verbs describe the Lord's presence with Samuel as a manifestation. We use the term *manifestation* because no one can see God's face and live (Exodus 33:20). A more scholarly term for this is a *theophany*.

The way Samuel hears God's voice invites us to consider how other prophets heard His voice in similar and dissimilar ways. For additional study, see Isaiah 6; Jeremiah 1; Ezekiel 2; Hosea 1; etc.

10b. This moment changes Samuel's life forever. It is one thing for God to call someone, but the call remains incomplete until the person answers. Samuel's words echo Eli's advice. He asks the Lord to *speak* and acknowledges himself as God's *servant*. He lets God know that he is poised to listen. This may be the reason the Lord initiates His communication at night. The distractions of the day are past, and the Lord has Samuel's full attention.

11. This verse begins a section that some scholars call "Samuel's dream." Samuel's encounter with the Lord doesn't seem to be in a dream, like Solomon's encounter, which comes centuries later (1 Kings 3:5). In contrast, Samuel is awake while receiving this message! In the ancient Near East, however, sleep was not required for an encounter to be classified as occurring in a dream. It counted as a dream if it happened at night when the recipient would usually be asleep.

In any case, God begins to reveal His plan to Samuel. He starts with a call to pay attention—the Hebrew word translated as *behold* indicates that what comes next is essential. In modern English, we might say, "Listen up!"

Tingling *ears* symbolize hearing the terrible news of God's anger. The description is powerful and occurs only in two other places in the Old Testament: when God speaks of bringing disaster upon Judah and Jerusalem and when God prophesies that the valley of the son of Hinnom will be renamed the Valley of Slaughter (2 Kings 21:12; Jeremiah 19:3).

12. God knows what has happened regarding Eli's wicked sons (1 Samuel 2:12–17). Eli also knows, and his weak attempt to correct his sons' behavior has been ineffectual (2:22–25). Since Eli won't stop their sin, God will do so Himself. This message is not God's first communication to Eli on the subject (2:27–36).

The phrasing of *begin . . . end* indicates totality—God's corrective action will be comprehensive.

13. God *will judge* against both "sins of commission" (actively committing sin) and "sins of omission" (failing to do something that one should do). Eli's two *sons* are guilty of the former; Eli himself is guilty of the latter. The sons were guilty of thievery that amounted to contempt (1 Samuel 2:12–17). Their sins also included adultery and dishonoring their father (2:22, 25). These corrupt priests did not operate in secret; ordinary Israelites knew about their mishandling of offerings (2:24).

Eli bears responsibility—and God is holding him to it. Eli heard about his sons' behavior, and while he did protest, his sons did not listen (1 Samuel 2:22–25). Eli did nothing more to stop them. As the head of the household, Eli was obligated to discipline his sons.

14. God has decided to act, and His decision is final. No *sacrifice* or *offering* will cause Him to change His mind. What was and is prophesied will indeed come to pass (1 Samuel 4:12–18)

II. Prophet Speaks
1 Samuel 3:15–20

15 And Samuel lay until the morning, and opened the doors of the house

of the LORD. And Samuel feared to shew Eli the vision.

16 Then Eli called Samuel, and said, Samuel, my son. And he answered, Here am I.

17 And he said, What is the thing that the LORD hath said unto thee? I pray thee hide it not from me: God do so to thee, and more also, if thou hide any thing from me of all the things that he said unto thee.

18 And Samuel told him every whit, and hid nothing from him. And he said, It is the LORD: let him do what seemeth him good.

19 And Samuel grew, and the LORD was with him, and did let none of his words fall to the ground.

20 And all Israel from Dan even to Beersheba knew that Samuel was established to be a prophet of the LORD.

15. After receiving the message from the Lord, *Samuel* does not immediately go to Eli—he stays in bed *until the morning*. When dawn arrives, he performs his regular duty of opening *the doors of the house of the Lord* to begin a new workday.

The message God gave Samuel is not easy to digest. As Samuel goes about his daily routines, he feels fear when he thinks about recounting it to *Eli*. We can easily imagine this because of Samuel's closeness with the elderly priest.

16. We wonder whether Eli experienced any insomnia after he sent Samuel back to receive the Lord's message! *Eli* waits out the night and then summons *Samuel*, identifying him as *my son*. He may be putting some pressure on Samuel by reminding him of the nature of their relationship. Samuel answers promptly: *Here am I*.

17. Eli couches his demand to know what Samuel heard in the language of a threat. Dire repercussions will ensue if Samuel doesn't tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Given the content of the revelation, we may easily imagine Samuel's reluctance to tell Eli plainly. Samuel faces a test of his integrity.

18a. Young *Samuel* performs a challenging aspect of prophecy: faithfully passing along what God has said. It is an unpleasant message, yet Samuel holds nothing back, passing his integrity test. Samuel accepts the Lord's calling as he steps into his role as a prophet for Israel, whether he realizes it or not.

18b. Eli is the *he* in this verse. To his credit, he receives the Lord's message and does not blame Samuel. Today we might say that Eli does not "shoot the messenger."

Eli recognizes God's authority over Samuel's message and accepts God's word. He submits to the Lord's determination of what is *good*.

19. As *Samuel* grows up, he conveys God's will for the people of Israel. Samuel's growth speaks of maturing not only physically but also spiritually. He will be the first of the prophets to foresee the outpouring of the time of the Messiah.

After the initial call, *the Lord* does not leave Samuel alone but remains *with him,* giving direction and faithful support. Samuel's encounter with God is not a one-and-done situation but the beginning of a lifetime spent on God's mission.

The phrase *did let none of his words fall to the ground* is unique. It only appears in precisely this way here. The Hebrew phrase seems to mean that people listened to Samuel, and God fulfilled the things He spoke through Samuel, marking him as a faithful prophet.

20. The towns of *Dan* and *Beersheba* denote the northernmost and southernmost cities in Israel, respectively. The phrase points to the totality of Israel in acknowledging Samuel as a *prophet of the Lord*.

Samuel steps into God's purpose for his life and becomes the last judge.

Involvement Learning

The Prophet Is Called

Into the Lesson

What does it mean to you to "be called" by God?

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Today's Bible study tells the story of how young Samuel was called by God. Pay attention to how Samuel learns to recognize God's voice and how his mentor Eli helps him.

Into the Word

Read 1 Samuel 3:8–10. Why do you think it took Samuel three times to realize God was calling him?

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What does Samuel's response signify?

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Why was Eli finally able to discern that it was the Lord?

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Key Text

Eli said unto Samuel, Go, lie down: and it shall be, if he call thee, that thou shalt say, Speak, LORD; for thy servant heareth.
—1 Samuel 3:9a

Read 1 Samuel 3:11–16. What does God's message to Samuel reveal about the nature of divine judgment?

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What does God's pronouncement against Eli and his sons tell us about the consequences of neglecting one's responsibilities?

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Read 1 Samuel 3:17–20. Why do you think Samuel told Eli everything God had revealed?

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What does this demonstrate about Samuel's willingness to serve God?

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How does Eli's response demonstrate his acceptance of God's will?

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Into Life

Using Samuel as an example, brainstorm ways to make truth-telling a part of your everyday life.

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Thought to Remember

Serve the Lord faithfully—even when (or especially when) it is difficult.