

1 Samuel 3:1-21 – “Samuel’s Call”

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Intro: What does it mean to be “called” to God’s service? Who initiates a calling? How does the one called know that he’s being called? How should he (or she) respond? These are some of the questions dealt with tonight through the story of the prophet Samuel’s call to serve the Lord. Our big idea tonight is:

Proposition: God took the initiative to call a new prophet to speak to His people; one who would be faithful in all things.

Billboard:	(vv.1-9)	Samuel’s Calling
	(vv.10-14)	Samuel’s Listening
	(vv.15-21)	Samuel’s Obedience

(vv.1-9) Samuel’s Calling – God took the initiative to call a new prophet to speak to His people – Samuel. Samuel was not a “found” item – God brought Samuel into the world to fulfill this calling. The call of God to His man is described in these verses: **1 Samuel 3:1–2 (ESV)** - *1 Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the LORD in the presence of 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.* These verses give us the context of Samuel’s call. Samuel was faithfully serving Eli, but “*the word of the Lord was rare in those days,*” we are told. God had stopped speaking to His people through their disobedient leaders. “The silence of God was the judgment of God,” said Warren Wiersbe, and perhaps one of the Bible’s most famous expressions of this comes from the prophet Amos: **Amos 8:11–12 (ESV)** - *11 “Behold, the days are coming,” declares the Lord God, “when I will send a famine on the land—not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD. 12 They shall wander from sea to sea, and from north to east; they shall run to and fro, to seek the word of the LORD, but they shall not find it.* When God’s people stop listening and obeying, God withdraws His speaking voice to the people, and they are forced to wander in darkness for a time. A reflection of this is what we are told about the people’s leader, Eli: **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.** Eli’s dim vision was more than physical; it was spiritual as well. Samuel is evidently about 12 years old according to Wiersbe. Samuel faithfully served Eli’s needs, which apparently included serving Eli’s personal needs in the nighttime hours, Eli’s eyesight now preventing him from attending to himself without assistance. Eli was laying down in his place and Samuel was nearby but also keeping the lamp of God burning in the Sanctuary until morning. The Ark of God was behind the veil in the Holy of Holies. The Ark symbolized the presence of God among His people. In the night, the Lord began calling Samuel, but Samuel didn’t recognize the Lord’s voice, mistaking it for Eli’s. **1 Samuel 3:4–7 (ESV)** - *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.* Note Samuel’s readiness to serve when called. Samuel’s heart is prepared – he has the good heart of a servant even as a child. Eli sends Samuel back to his bed three times, before finally realizing what is happening – It is the Lord who is calling Samuel: **1 Samuel 3:8 (ESV)** - *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 boy.* Verse seven explains

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that: *Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD; the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him.*¹ That was about to change. Samuel was “religious” *knowing about* God and was even open to serve God but would not *know* the Lord – be converted to Him personally – until the Lord revealed His word in Samuel’s heart. Eli gave Samuel good counsel: **1 Samuel 3:9 (ESV) - 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. Samuel obeyed Eli’s counsel.*

[DOCTRINAL POINT] God takes the initiative to call into His service servants whose hearts He has prepared. No man can take this upon himself. It is the work of God alone.

[ILLUSTRATION] It is a principle that cannot be ignored: Before any man can seek God, God must first have sought the man. God save His Church from the Hophni and Phineas’ that find their way into positions of service with hearts unprepared by God.

[APPLICATION] How are we to understand all of this? In the matter of calling, God must first seek the man, before the man seeks God. Samuel was prepared by God to serve God from birth, but though he was prepared, he wasn’t ready until God revealed Himself to Him personally. God’s calling was specific and relentless, building in intensity as the account shows. It may often happen that the call of God takes time to discern, and a man will need the help of another more experienced man of God to guide him as Samuel needed Eli’s counsel. But the prepared heart follows that counsel. The call grew in intensity until it was finally made clear and responded to by the prepared heart. God is behind each step in this process. No one “*knows the Lord*” until the Lord reveals His Word to his heart.

(vv.10-14) Samuel’s Listening – Samuel comes to life spiritually and vocationally through God’s speaking and Samuel’s obedient response: **1 Samuel 3:10 (ESV) - 10** *And the LORD came and stood, calling as at other times, “Samuel! Samuel!” And Samuel said, “Speak, for your servant hears.”* A lot is going on in this verse. The urgency of God’s call comes to a climax. “*God came and stood,*” apparently meaning that in this case God made Himself visible to Samuel in some way. Also, the double call, “*Samuel! Samuel!*” echoes other instances in Scripture of God’s crucial calling of important figures: Abraham, Jacob, Moses, and the Apostle Paul are a few. Samuel’s response to God was personal and willing, echoing Eli’s instruction with one exception: he did not say, “*Lord.*” Why not? Because he did not yet *know* the Lord. Samuel’s conversion came the moment God began to reveal His Word to Samuel in verse eleven. No one knows the Lord until the Lord brings His Word to life in his heart. The prepared heart is willing to receive God’s Word, responding with openness to God’s call, and conversion follows immediately as God’s speaking voice brings light and life to the soul. “*Knowing*” the Lord is different from “*knowing about*” the Lord. Many people “*know about*” the Lord, but no one “*knows*” the Lord until God brings His Word to life in their heart.

God’s message to Samuel is for Eli. He reiterated the message of the prophet already sent in chapter 2:27ff. Samuel would have had no knowledge of this previous message, but Eli would have immediately recognized Samuel’s message as another confirming word from God. God’s messages

¹ Biblical Studies Press. (2005). [The NET Bible First Edition; Bible. English. NET Bible.; The NET Bible](#) (1 Sa 3:7). Biblical Studies Press.

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through His prophets are various but consistent – never contradictory. Verse 14 makes explicit what verse 2:25 stated implicitly – Eli’s sons had passed the point of forgiveness with God: **1 Samuel 3:14 (ESV) - 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.*” Priests, like anyone else, were liable to fall into sin through weakness and temptation. Those sins could be atoned for through sacrifice. But persistent, deliberate rejection of God is unpardonable (cf. Numbers 15:30; Matthew 12:31-32).

Notice that in all these verses, Samuel says not a word. His entire responsibility is to LISTEN and ABSORB all that God has to say. This is an important principle to learn by all who heed God’s call.

[DOCTRINAL POINT] God’s servants are prepared for the work He calls them to by *listening to and absorbing* His Words.

[ILLUSTRATION] “When are we ever going to use this stuff?” Remember? If, like me, you suffered through Algebra, Geometry, Western Civilization classes, etc., you probably at some point at least thought of that question, and maybe even asked it outright! The answer to your question is, “Never! Unless you LISTEN to and ABSORB what is being said to you!” There are plenty of good uses for Algebra, Geometry, and Western Civ, if you respond willingly and personally to what is being taught. In just that same way...

[APPLICATION] The one called by God must respond willingly and personally to the call if anything wonderful is going to happen. The prophet must listen to all God says and take it to heart himself before he can share it with others. Surely this word from God was painful for Samuel to hear, Eli being a surrogate father to him. Imagine how Samuel must have felt hearing this message from the Lord! God spoke all His mind to Samuel on the matter and expected Samuel to take His Word seriously, whether good or bad; pleasant, or painful toward those Samuel loved. Attention must be paid to all God says, if those called are going to fulfill the mission to which He is calling them.

(vv.15-21) Samuel’s Obedience – Samuel’s obedience began by fulfilling his normal duties in the House of God: **1 Samuel 3:15 (ESV) - 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.* One commentator suggests that Samuel went about his duties that morning hoping to avoid meeting with Eli. Perhaps, but that is speculation at best. What is certain is that being young, Samuel lacked the courage to tell the vision to Eli, his surrogate father figure. Eli, more experienced in the way of the Lord, induced Samuel to tell him everything, teaching Samuel an important lesson about the duty of a prophet: **1 Samuel 3:16–17 (ESV) - 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.”* It is required of a prophet that he be faithful to tell everything God sends through him to His people. If he is unfaithful in this God will hold him accountable, as Eli points out. Isn’t it ironic that Eli, who has been unfaithful by honoring his sons above God, would be the one God sent to teach Samuel the importance of obedience? And what about Eli’s behavior? Don’t you find his response to Samuel’s words curious? **1 Samuel 3:18 (ESV) - 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.”* Some commentators take this to be mere resignation on Eli’s part, as if to say, “There is nothing I can do now. Whatever happens, happens!” Perhaps that is the

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meaning, but I think there is a better point of view. Many commentators see Eli’s statement as an expression of humility and agreement with the Lord’s decision. They point out that Eli knew the principle that willful, persistent refusal of repentance was the one unpardonable sin. Eli had told his sons this in 2:25. Sadly, Eli recognized that his sons had made their choice to refuse God and that judgment was inevitable. So, his reply to Samuel’s words were words of humility and acceptance of all that God had said He would do. Through Eli’s prompting, Samuel delivered all the message God had sent Him to proclaim. Samuel obeyed God’s command.

[DOCTRINAL POINT] Samuel passed the test every prophet must pass: He honored God and His Word by faithfully revealing the message God had given him.

[ILLUSTRATION] In our Bibles, especially in the New Testament we encounter the idea of stewardship. “The idea has its roots in the institution of slavery. The master appointed a slave to administer his household which might include the teaching and disciplining of the members of the house, especially other slaves and the children.”² The chief characteristic of a good steward was detailed for us in **1 Corinthians 4:2 (ESV)** - *2 Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful.* In just this same way, faithfulness, obedience – this is the chief characteristic God seeks in all whom He calls to be His servants.

[APPLICATION] To be called by God is an honor. To listen to His voice and absorb what He is telling us is our salvation and our obligation. But neither of those things can bear fruit for God’s glory if we fail to obey His commands. Obedience completes our mission. Obedience fulfills our purpose. It’s wonderful to belong to God. It’s amazing to hear His voice. But it all falls to the ground if we don’t do what He sends us to do. Obedience fulfills or completes our calling.

Epilogue: (vv.19-21) Samuel responded to God’s call with acceptance and obedience. These verses show us what God can make of a faithful servant. Verse 19 tells us that Samuel grew and enjoyed God’s blessing on his ministry. Verse 20 tells us that all Israel knew that God was speaking to them again through His prophet, Samuel. Verse 21 tells us that the people again experienced the presence of God in His appointed place of worship, Shiloh. That last verse is especially noteworthy because it shows us that God’s presence among His people is known through His Word. If you belong to Jesus, you are one who has been called by God to be His servant. See what God can make of someone faithful like Samuel! That is what He can also make of you, my friend. Heed His call; listen to His voice; obey His commands. Join Him in His work.

² Baker Dictionary of Theology, pg. 502.