

BaptistWay Press® Premium Commentary

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Studies in Character and the Crown (1 Samuel)

Lesson Two

Recognizing and Responding to God's Voice

Focal Text

1 Samuel 3

Background

1 Samuel 3

Main Idea

Samuel eventually recognized and faithfully responded to God's call on his life.

Question to Explore

How have you responded to God's call in your life?

Quick Read

God call us to salvation, surrender, and service. As we listen for God's call in our lives, we can respond and experience a full and abundant life with him.

Introduction

In the summer of 1962, my Royal Ambassador group from the Temple Baptist Church in Tyler, Texas, where my Dad was the pastor, attended an RA Camp at Pineywoods Baptist Encampment near Groveton. On the last night of the camp, after a "foreign missionary" had spoken, an invitation or decision time was extended.

I was standing next to my best friend and Little League teammate, Bill Durham. I turned to my friend and declared that we should go forward and make a decision. He replied, "No one should go down there, unless he feels like he is supposed to." That was how I felt, and I did go down there.

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That night I declared that I believed God was calling me into Christian service, to become a pastor. When I returned home, I met with my dad/pastor in his office. His counsel to me was if you think that you can be happy doing anything else in life, then do it. He did not want me to pursue this ministry direction if my motivation was to make Mom and him happy. He sometimes described some pastors he knew as “Daddy called and Momma sent” but not called by God. I assured Dad that I made that decision, as certain as a twelve-year-old boy can be, in response to a call from God.

We continued that conversation over the months, and on January 27, 1963, my dad/pastor gave me the privilege to preach in the evening worship service. He helped me tremendously in the preparation of that first sermon. I was twelve-years-old, and the sermon was twelve minutes long. The congregation was quite affirming, especially of its brevity. The sermon was entitled “The Man God Uses” based on 1 Samuel 3:1-21. I used that text because I felt somewhat of a kinship with a boy named Samuel. Both of us heard the voice of God calling us to serve him. (With that feature, of course, the comparison ends.) Since that time, this story has had a special place in my heart.

Commentary

It is possible to read directly from 1 Samuel 1:28 to 3:1. Chapter two expresses an ongoing interest in Samuel, although he is not the focus of it.

And he [Samuel] worshiped the LORD there (1:28)

Hannah's prayer and praise (2:1-10)

The boy ministered before the LORD under Eli the priest (2:11)

The Corruption and Wickedness of Eli's sons (2:12-25)

And the boy Samuel continued to grow in stature and in favor with the LORD and with men (2:26)

The Prophetic Word of Judgment against Eli's house (2:27-36)

The boy Samuel ministered before the LORD under Eli (3:1)

Not Recognizing God's Voice (3:1-7)

The context of Christian ministry has changed dramatically over the last fifty-sixty years. **Then**, most persons in the United States had an understanding, at least a superficial one, of the gospel, while **now** many persons know nothing of the basic teachings of the Christian faith. **Then**, Christian faith enjoyed a privileged and respected position in our culture, while **now** it is one religious option among many. **Then**, our culture, with regard to the hours of retail stores and youth sports, honored days and times that were recognized as times for worship and church involvement, while **now** that is certainly not the case.

Samuel's ministry context at Shiloh was more like **now** than like **then**. It was a time in which people were not very responsive to God. “The word of the LORD” (3:1) was a technical expression for people receiving a revelation from God through the proclamation

of a prophetic spokesperson. Through prophets, God communicated messages through words or through visions. Neither of these vehicles of divine communication occurred regularly at this time.

Although he was not an adult yet, Samuel assisted Eli with some priestly and pragmatic duties. The verb underlying “ministered” (3:1) was used for both spiritual service and royal service. It usually refers to someone who helps or assists another or attends to the needs of a superior. Samuel was obedient to Yahweh by being subservient to Eli.

During this time when God did not allow himself to be seen, the priest Eli could not have “seen” God had he appeared. Eli’s defective physical eyesight, which would ultimately end in his blindness (4:15), may explain the curious places where he and Samuel regularly slept (3:2).

The structure that is called a “temple” (also 1:7), was probably a portable tent sanctuary with some permanent features rather than a structure built as a permanent building. This is the first mention of the ark of the covenant in this book. It was the most significant piece of worship furniture in ancient Israel, representing the presence of Yahweh with Israel. It is prominently featured in 1 Samuel 4-6 and 2 Samuel 6. Samuel’s sleeping position near the ark seems to be a very important responsibility for the “boy” Samuel. He may have received this assignment due to Eli’s failing vision.

A third reference to dim vision may suggest the time of night in which the central focus of this chapter occurred. The priests had the obligation of keeping the lamp in the tabernacle burning constantly (Exodus 27:20-21). The time in which it came closer to burning out than any other time was just before dawn. In a time when there were few visions, when Eli the priest could hardly see, and when the lamp of God was about to go out, Yahweh appeared to the boy Samuel and spoke to him. This appearance signaled a new possibility or major transformative period.

This narrative has some of the usual features that we commonly find in accounts where God calls a prophet to serve him. Compare this story with the call experiences of Moses (Exodus 3), Isaiah (Isaiah 6), and Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1). One might expect this since the language of verse one is the terminology of God’s revelation of his word through a prophet.

The first two times God called to Samuel and the resultant interactions with Eli are very similar. The best way to compare the two is as follows:

First Call (3:4-5)
Yahweh called Samuel
Here I am
Ran to Eli
Here I am, you called me

Second Call (3:6)
Yahweh called name “Samuel”
Got up and went to Eli
Here I am, you called me

I did not call—Go lie down
Went and lay down

My Son, I did not call—Go lie down

Did the change in verbs, from “ran” to “got up and went” signify less of an urgency by Samuel in his second response? “Here I am” is the best way to respond to God’s call (Gen. 22:1, 11; Exod. 3:4; Isa. 6:8). Eli’s term of endearment “my son” was the usual phrase used to describe the relationship of prophets with their disciples or followers.

The narrator is careful to convey why Samuel did not know what the reader already knows. Samuel was not naïve or dense; rather, he did not recognize the voice of God because God had never spoken directly to him like this. God had not yet established his special relationship with Samuel. Eli’s sons are described by this same phrase (1 Sam. 2:12), but there it means they refused to acknowledge God or obey him. Here it means Samuel had no previous experience with God; thus, he could not be expected to know that it was God who was calling his name.

Recognizing God’s Voice (3:8-14)

In his book *The Handbook of Coaching*, Frederic Hudson offered one of the first comprehensive assessments of the personal and professional phenomenon that began sometime in the late 1980s.¹ Coaching is a working partnership in which a “coach” helps to provide structure, guidance, and support for a “client.” Coaches help their clients make decisions more effectively, take necessary actions, resolve complex problems by reframing the issues, and discover the meaning of living authentic lives.

God called to Samuel a third time, and again Samuel thought it was Eli who had called him (1 Sam. 3:8). Eli broke the repetitive cycle. The priest who was going blind physically “saw” what was happening and gave Samuel instructions. Eli coached Samuel in spiritual matters. He realized Yahweh was speaking to Samuel and related to Samuel how he should respond to him in an obedient way. “Listening” (3:9) renders the Hebrew verb *shamah* from which Samuel’s name is formed.

The fourth time God called to Samuel in the night was different. “The LORD came and stood there” (3:10) is the language regularly used for a visionary experience (Gen. 28:13; Exod. 34:5; Job 4:16). Through the spoken word and vision to Samuel, God signaled the reversal of the lack of both of those realities in Israel (1 Sam. 3:1).

God called Samuel’s name twice. The dual calling of a name underscored the significance of the divine word shared, whether it was God who was calling (Abraham, Gen. 22:11; Jacob, Gen. 46:2; Moses, Exod. 3:4;) or Jesus who spoke (Martha, Luke 10:41; Simon, Luke 22:31; Saul, Acts 9:4).

On Sunday afternoon, August 15, 2010, four-year-old Travis Mitchell was playing with an older sibling and other children in a wooded area between their neighborhood and the Payson, Arizona, airport. When the children arrived home, Travis was not with them. The

search for little Travis would last for eighteen hours before he was found unharmed late Monday morning. He was spotted by Wyman Kendall, part of the search team, on horseback, in Whiskey Canyon. Kendall asked, "Are you Travis Mitchell?" The preschooler's response to the stranger was, "How did you know my name?"

The good news of Scripture is that God knows each of his children by name (Isa. 43:1). He may call us to serve him when we least expect it, at the most inopportune moment, or in the most unlikely of situations. God may also have to call us multiple times to get our attention. As was the case with Samuel, no one is too young or small or unimportant for God to call into meaningful ministry.

Samuel responded, exactly as Eli had instructed him. Samuel listened as God spoke (1 Sam. 3:11-14). Sometimes God calls us to a ministry or service in his behalf that is difficult to carry out. God's revealed word to Samuel was a word of condemnation and judgment on Eli and his sons. How could Samuel communicate that kind of word to Eli?

When we are talking about someone, and they walk into the room, we ask them whether "their ears were burning." The rare Hebrew phrase about someone's hears tingling or ringing (3:11) occurs only three times in the Old Testament (also 2 Kings 21:12 and Jeremiah 19:3). A man of God (prophet) had already conveyed to Eli God's declaration of a coming punishment upon him and his family (1 Sam. 2:27-36). God told Samuel that he would initiate the action (3:11) that he had previously announced (3:12).

Eli's sons had discharged their priestly duties in a dishonorable way, and Eli evidently could not control or contain their sinfulness (3:13). No sacrifices could be offered to provide the necessary atonement for sins since their very sins involved the complete disregard for the holiness of these solemn acts of worship (3:14).

Recognizing and Responding to God's Voice (3:15-21)

Samuel probably did not sleep well the rest of the night after receiving this word. He must have dreaded facing Eli the next morning. Have you ever dreaded to face someone because you needed to tell him/her something that would negatively impact them? I have.

He was one of our best deacons and a most-loved Bible teacher for adults. He was an excellent student of the Scriptures. I loved to hear him pray. He was also one of my best friends. He and his wife would always take my family to dinner to celebrate the anniversary of when I became their pastor. He traveled to Israel with me. During some "free time," we walked through the Old City of Jerusalem together, even on top of part of the wall near the Damascus Gate. Then the time arrived for him to retire or step down from doing what he loved the most, teaching his Sunday School class; however, he was not ready to do that. I was the one who needed to convince him that it had to happen. I dreaded it.

That was Samuel's dilemma. Eli knew God was calling Samuel to receive a word from him, and Samuel knew Eli would want to hear the content of that divine word.

It is uncertain whether the doors Samuel opened (3:15) were the doors between the rooms where he and Eli respectively slept, or whether they were the doors that opened the sanctuary to the people. Opening these doors was a physical act. Another door was being opened, however. It was the beginning of God using Samuel as a "spiritual door" through whom he would speak to his people during an important transitional time.

The moment Samuel dreaded came. Even as God had called him by name, Eli did as well. He even used the endearment term "my son" (3:16) he had used before (3:6). Samuel responded to Eli in the same way he had done previously when he thought Eli was calling him (3:4, 6, 8).

Remember that "In those days the **word** [emphasis is mine] of the LORD was rare" (3:1). The use of that phrase including the Hebrew term *dabar* signified the divine word or message that was received through a prophetic person. By delivering God's word to Eli, Samuel was functioning in a prophetic role. Eli clearly understood that as he used the word *dabar* five times asserting that Samuel must tell him everything (3:17).

Samuel had been obedient in listening to God. Now he was obedient in speaking to Eli what God had told him. Eli had mentored Samuel well about listening to God when he speaks (3:8-9). Now Eli modeled well for Samuel the importance of listening to God and obeying his word. We must commend Eli for receiving this negative word with courage and for responding to God in trust. I commended my deacon and good friend for responding to our conversation with that same courage and trust in God.

Samuel was very fortunate to have an Eli in his early spiritual journey. Like Samuel, I was very fortunate to have an Eli in my early journey. My father was my Eli. It was his hand that grasped mine when at age six I trusted Jesus and made a public decision. He is the one who baptized me.

I rode with him on Sunday mornings to pick up persons who had no transportation or way to get to church. I watched him come home after helping people deal with crises in their lives. He is the one who counseled me and helped me clarify my decision when I responded to God's call upon my life. He gave me the opportunity to fill his pulpit and helped me prepare. He gave my name to preach for a church when they did not have a pastor. I did, and they invited me to become their pastor, my first place of pastoral service.

This nighttime conversation between Yahweh and Samuel was the beginning of a long relationship between them. It was the beginning of Samuel's ministry as a "prophet" (3:20). Samuel is the only who is designated as a prophet in this book by this term *nabi*'. A prophet was one whose "words" conveyed the "word" of God to God's people.

The final three verses of this chapter assert several things about Samuel's ministry as a prophet. Since prophets were spokespersons for God, it was important for them to feel the close presence of Yahweh with them, and Samuel did (3:19). Since God was present with Samuel, he "let none of his words fall to the ground" (3:19). Samuel successfully declared the word of God to the Israelites. They were purposeful and not wasted.

All Israel recognized Samuel to be God's fully authorized prophet. "From Dan to Beersheba" (3:20) was the characteristic phrase used to describe all the land of Israel (Judg. 20:1; 2 Sam. 3:10; 17:11; 24:2). These two cities marked the northern and southern boundaries, respectively. Although Samuel enjoyed this respected reputation throughout all the twelve tribes of Israel, he was especially well-known and functioned seemingly in a much smaller area of influence (1 Sam. 7:15-17).

Shiloh continued to be a place where Yahweh revealed himself to Samuel as he did on this significant night (3:21). The place of God's work remained the same, but the leadership had changed. Samuel succeeded his mentor Eli as the one through whom God worked in Shiloh. It is likely that the sanctuary at Shiloh was destroyed when the Philistines defeated the Israelites and captured the ark of the covenant (1 Sam. 4:10-11). When this devastating event happened, Samuel was the spiritual leader of Israel, but he does not appear again in this book until chapter 7.

Conclusion

In our culture, time is one of our most precious commodities. In business and in relationships, response time is important. Our phones are constantly in our hands. We cannot stand to "miss a call." We want to receive information instantly through emails and texts. We record messages for missed calls so we can reply as soon as possible.

I see it every time I fly. When the front door closes, and the flight attendant makes the announcement about turning your phone off or putting it in airplane mode, some people come close to an emotional crash. They hold their phones in their hands and look at them as if their lives will be essentially over if they have to be "unplugged" for the duration of the flight.

The most important calls that we ever receive are the calls that come from God. He calls us to give our lives to him, to receive the gift of salvation. He calls us to perform ministry in the name of Jesus. He calls us to be involved in the life of a church (Greek *ekklesia* or "the called-out ones"). Above all other calls that we receive, these are the ones that we cannot afford to miss.

Meet the Writer: Dr. Ron Lyles

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¹ Frederic M. Hudson, *The Handbook of Coaching* (Hoboken, New Jersey: Jossey-Bass, 1999).