

THE LORD CALLS SAMUEL

1 Samuel 2:12-4:1a

Key Verse: 3:10

The LORD came and stood there, calling as at the other times, "Samuel! Samuel!" Then Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

In today's passage God calls the boy Samuel when he was just an errand boy in the house of God. It was one of the darkest times in Israel's history as people did everything as they saw fit. Even the priests were corrupt. In this situation, God called one man to raise him up to be a shepherd for his people. And when God called him, the boy Samuel was ready to listen to God. May God help us to say, as Samuel did, "Speak, for your servant is listening"!

I. ELI, HIS SONS AND THE BOY SAMUEL (2:12-36)

Last week, we learned that Hannah dedicated her son Samuel to the Lord as soon as he was weaned. So the boy Samuel grew up in the house of God, away from his home and family, under Eli the priest as his surrogate father. Now, you might think that the house of God provided an ideal environment for the boy to grow up spiritually. But the environment there wasn't all good for Samuel.

First, Eli's sons were wicked (12-17). Look at verse 12: *"Eli's sons were wicked men; they had no regard for the Lord."* Eli had two sons, Hophni and Phinehas. Eli was very old (2:22) and his sons became active priests in the house of God. Eli was a heavy man and was inactive; he was always either sitting or lying down. And his sons did wicked things behind his back. Two particular things are recorded to describe their wickedness. One was their interception of people's offerings for the Lord. Verses 13-17 give the details. When people brought their animal offerings to the house of God for the atonement of their sins, they burned the fat as an aroma pleasing to the Lord (Lev 3:3-5). This was what God had commanded his people. God allowed the priest to take his share of meat (breast) after the fat was burned off on the altar (Lev 7:31). But Eli's sons sent their servant to take the meat before the fat was burned off. They wanted the meat with the fat which was tastier to them. Look at verse 17. *This sin of the young men was very great in the Lord's sight, for they were treating the Lord's offering with contempt.*

The other evil thing that Eli's sons did was sleeping with the women who served at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, the sanctuary (2:22). They had sex with the women who served the Lord in the house of God! They abused their positions as priests.



Some years ago, a popular tele-evangelist also committed sins before God. He used the offering money to build several multi-million dollar houses for him and even an air-conditioned house for his dog. He also committed adultery with a church secretary. He ruined his family and became a laughingstock to many. He dishonored God by his sins. So what was the root cause of Eli's son's wickedness? Again verse 12 says: *"Eli's sons were wicked men; they had no regard for the Lord."* They had no respect for God's word and did not pay attention to him. They had no fear of God. Perhaps they didn't mean to become so wicked at the beginning. But when they had no regard for God and his word, they followed their sinful desires. Right under their father's nose in the house of God, they did wicked things before the Lord.

Second, Eli failed to discipline his sons (22-26). How did Eli help his sons? Initially he wasn't even aware of what his sons were doing. He was the last one to find out. Verse 22 says, *"Now Eli, who was very old, heard about everything his sons were doing to all Israel ..."* He was an old man. But this was no excuse for him not knowing the wicked things that his sons were doing in the house of God. Yet, the worse was what he did when he heard about it, or rather what he didn't do. This is what Eli said to his sons: *"Why do you do such things? I hear from all the people about these wicked deeds of yours. No, my sons; it is not a good report that I hear spreading among the Lord's people. If a man sins against another man, God may mediate for him; but if a man sins against the Lord, who will intercede for him?"* (23-24).

In talking to his sons, Eli used general and hypothetical terms like, "Not a good report," and *"If a man sins against another man."* What kind of rebuke is this? Talking about a slap on the wrist for such terrible sins! Eli didn't seem very angry. He was not furious. He did not rebuke them directly. He never said, "Repent and stop these wicked things!" Later, God rebuked Eli for "honoring" his sons more than God by "fattening" himself on the choice parts of every offering made by the people of Israel (29). (Perhaps Eli unknowingly enjoyed some of the fat his sons took (4:18).) God also rebuked Eli for failing to restrain his sons (3:13). He failed to discipline them. What was Eli's problem? He was more worried about the bad report spreading among people and maintaining good terms with his sons than honoring God. What was the result? His sons did not listen to his rebuke (25). They had no fear of the Lord; they had no respect for their father. They didn't listen to him.

Third, "Those who honor me I will honor" (27-36). Eli failed to discipline his sons in a decisive manner. But God would not idly watch them doing wicked things in the house of God, as Eli did. The Lord decided to put them to death (25). God sent a messenger to Eli to remind him how God had blessed his family with the privilege to serve the Lord and how he squandered the blessings. A man of God came to Eli and said, *"I chose your father out of all the tribes of Israel to be my priest, to go up to my altar, to burn incense, and to wear an ephod in my presence. I also gave your father's house all the offerings made with fire by the Israelites. Why do you scorn my sacrifice and offering that I prescribed for my dwelling? Why do you honor your sons more than me by fattening yourselves on the choice parts of every offering made by my people Israel?"* (28-29). God rebuked Eli for honoring his sons more than God when he failed

to discipline them. (Later, Eli also showed that he was more concerned about the symbols of his religion than with the God they represented when he used the ark of the covenant as a religious relic in a war against the Philistines (4:4).)

God had planned to use Eli's family line to minister before the Lord forever (30). But now the Lord declared: *"Far be it from me! Those who honor me I will honor, but those who despise me will be disdained. The time is coming when I will cut short your strength and the strength of your father's house, so that there will not be an old man in your family line and you will see distress in my dwelling. Although good will be done to Israel, in your family line there will never be an old man. Every one of you that I do not cut off from my altar will be spared only to blind your eyes with tears and to grieve your heart, and all your descendants will die in the prime of life"* (30-33). This prediction was fulfilled when Solomon removed Abiathar from his position, ending Eli's line (1Ki 2:26-27). God raised up Zadok to serve as a priest under David and high priest under Solomon, just as he promised in verse 35: *I will raise up for myself a faithful priest, who will do according to what is in my heart and mind. I will firmly establish his house, and he will minister before my anointed one always.* We learn here about God in his dealing with this problem that he disciplines his people when his servants fail to take disciplinary actions. Eli's failure was not just a family issue. He failed as God's servant. God gave Eli several warnings about his sons' problems, spelled out the consequences of disobedience, and then acted. But Eli only warned his sons.

Fourth, the boy Samuel grew up in the presence of the Lord (18-20; 26).

Meanwhile what was the boy Samuel doing? Verse 18 says: *But Samuel was ministering before the Lord--a boy wearing a linen ephod.* Despite the evil men above him, the boy Samuel grew in the presence of God. He was ministering before the Lord, wearing a linen ephod, a long vest worn by priests. What kind of things did he do to serve the Lord, wearing the priestly garment? Most likely he ran errands for Eli. He was always ready to serve the priest. Specifically he did things like opening the doors of the house of God every morning (3:15) and keeping the lamp of God burning in the temple (3:3). The oil used to burn the lamp was not connected to a pipeline. Samuel had to constantly watch the level of the oil for all the lamps so that it would not run out. The fact that he slept near the ark of God tells us that he was vigilant. Samuel was only a boy, but he did not sleep in until late morning. He was spiritually alert. Verse 26 summarizes his life in the house of God. *And the boy Samuel continued to grow in stature and in favor with the Lord and with men.* (This reminds of the boy Jesus in Luke 2:52). Despite the terrible influence of the sons of Eli, the boy Samuel was with God and God was with him.

Hannah, Samuel's mother, continued to support him from a distance. *Each year his mother made him a little robe and took it to him when she went up with her husband to offer the annual sacrifice* (19). She saw Samuel only once a year. It was painful for her not to be able to see him for 12 months. (It is hard for me to wait even a few weeks to see my grandchildren, Isabella and Jonathan. At least I can see them weekly via video chatting). Hannah must have prayed a lot for Samuel as she made a robe for him each year. With her prayer support, *the boy Samuel grew up in the presence of the Lord* (21). As a boy, Samuel must have felt homesickness and questioned

why he had to do all these things when other boys played outside with their friends. (When I was about his age, I had to be away from home, family and friends. I still remember how I was homesick every single day. In the bathroom, I counted the days left until I would finally go home). How could Samuel endure his loneliness? He must have remembered his mother Hannah's words about her prayer, her vow and God's answer. Once a year, his mother would bring a new robe. It was an expression of her love and prayer for him. He probably felt her love whenever he put on the robe. Perhaps he never wanted to take it off. The robe reminded him of her vow and God's grace upon her and himself.

II. GOD CALLS SAMUEL (3:1-4:1a)

Many of us here have had a life-changing experience through God's personal calling. When he was a medical student, God called Dr. John to be a fisher of men through Mark 1:17. Because of God's calling, he is now an MD with mission. Likewise for Samuel, God's calling became the foundation of his life and mission throughout his life. Let us learn how God called him and how Samuel responded.

First, the lamp of God had not yet gone out (1-3). 1 Samuel 3:1 describes the times of Eli and Samuel with these words: *The boy Samuel ministered before the Lord under Eli. In those days the word of the Lord was rare; there were not many visions.* What does it mean the word of the Lord was rare? During the time of Exodus, Moses frequently talked with God. He delivered the word of God to his people. But by Eli's time, there was no one who preached the word of God. The word of God was rare. The Lord had told the Israelites to memorize the word of God on a daily basis and obey the word. They were instructed to write down the word of God on their foreheads and on the doors of their houses (Dt 6:7-9). But in Eli's time, the word of God was rare. No one studied the word of God seriously. The young and old only paid attention to the things of the world, neglecting the word of God.

Sadly this is happening in our generation as well. Quantitatively, we seem to have an abundance of God's word. There are dozens of Bible translations. We have an easy access to the Scriptures via the Web, cell phones and tablets. Still, the word of God seems to be rare today. Many people neglect to listen to God by studying the word of God prayerfully. They would rather pay attention to wise men and women and their books and interviews. What is the consequence of this? In Eli's time, there were not many visions from God as they neglected the word of God. Listening to God through studying his word and responding to his word is important for our relationship with God. To have a relationship with another person, we need to talk to him, listen to him and respond to him. This is especially true with our relationship with God. But when the Israelites failed to do this, they had no vision from God. So they lived according to their own ideas and desires. "Everyone did as he saw fit." Eli's sons were an example of this. They were priests, but they ignored the word of God. As a result, they followed their sinful desires.

In this situation, God preserved a ray of hope for his people. Look at verses 2-3. *One night Eli, whose eyes were becoming so weak that he could barely see, was lying down in his usual place. The lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the Lord, where the ark of God was.* Eli's eyes were becoming so weak that he could barely see. It seems that his spiritual eyes were getting dim as well. He was lying down in his usual place. But the lamp of God had not yet gone out, because there was a boy who kept the lamp of God burning. He was also lying down, but he was lying down near the ark of God. The ark of God contained the word of God. It was as if Samuel wanted to be close to God and his word. His heart and mind were in the right place. No doubt he prayed a lot as well. The word of God was rare at that time, but the lamp of God had not yet gone out. It was because there was a boy who was lying down near the ark of God. Are we lying down near the word of God at night? Are we keeping the lamp of God burning?



Second, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening” (4-18). How did the Lord intervene? He called Samuel to raise him to be a shepherd for his people. One night, as Samuel was lying down beside the ark of God, someone called his name. Look at verses 4-6. *Then the Lord called Samuel. Samuel answered, “Here I am.” And he ran to Eli and said, “Here I am; you called me.” But Eli said, “I did not call; go back and lie down.” So he went and lay down. Again the Lord called, “Samuel!” And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, “Here I am; you called me.” “My son,” Eli said, “I did not call; go back and lie down.”* Each time, Samuel thought Eli was calling him. So he went to Eli and said, “Here I am; you called me.” By this time, Samuel must have been a preteen or a teenager. But he was ready to serve the priest any time. He got up repeatedly in the middle of night to serve. But why did Samuel go to Eli each time? Why didn't he know it was God who was calling him? It was because Samuel had no personal relationship with God at this time. He was a faithful assistant to Eli the priest. But he had not met God personally. Verse 7 says: *Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord: The word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him.* This time, however, God called him personally to train him and use him for his purpose.



The Lord called Samuel a third time, and Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, “Here I am; you called me.” Then Eli realized that the Lord was calling the boy. So Eli told Samuel, “Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, ‘Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.’” So Samuel went and lay down in his place (8-9). Let us read verse 10 together. *The Lord came and stood there, calling as at the other times, “Samuel! Samuel!” Then Samuel said, “Speak, for your servant is listening.”* This time, God called his name twice. Samuel said, “Speak, for your servant is listening.” Samuel was ready to listen to God. The word of God was rare at that time. His people did not pay attention to the word of God. But there was one young man who was ready to listen to

God. He didn't hit the snooze button when God called him in the middle of the night. He heard the voice of God calling him and he said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

It is not easy to listen to God. Eli's sons did not listen to God's word. So they failed to listen to their father. Even Jesus' disciples had a hard time listening to the Lord. Jesus taught them his upcoming suffering, death and resurrection again and again, but his word went in one ear and out the other. On the mount of transfiguration, God appeared to them and said, "Listen to him!" (Mk 9:7).

How about us? We need to think about the importance of listening to God. Without listening to his word, we may not be able to hear God. That's why Jesus said, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear" (Mk 4:9). We cannot have God's vision if we fail to listen to him. We cannot listen to him if our hearts and minds are filled with many things of this world. How can we listen to God if we don't have a time set aside to hear him? May God help us to listen to him through our Bible studies and prayers!

What can we learn about God who called Samuel? God had a shepherd's heart for his people. He wanted to help them by calling a young man to be their shepherd and a Bible teacher. Our God is a compassionate and merciful God. Even today, God is eager to call a young man or woman to be his servant. God is calling us. Are we ready to listen to him? God may not speak to us audibly as he did to Samuel, but he speaks to us through the word of God, if we are willing to listen. God "reveals himself through his word" (3:21).

Third, he let none of his words fall to the ground (19-4:1a). What message did the Lord give Samuel? *And the Lord said to Samuel: "See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make the ears of everyone who hears of it tingle. At that time I will carry out against Eli everything I spoke against his family--from beginning to end. For I told him that I would judge his family forever because of the sin he knew about; his sons made themselves contemptible, and he failed to restrain them. Therefore, I swore to the house of Eli, 'The guilt of Eli's house will never be atoned for by sacrifice or offering'"* (11-14). The Lord shared with Samuel his plan to judge Eli and his family. His sons' sin of showing contempt to God and Eli's failure to restrain them were serious. The guilt of Eli's house would never be forgiven by sacrifice or offering. This was terrible news for Eli. It was difficult for the young Samuel to hear the news and even more difficult to tell it to Eli who was his spiritual father. Samuel lay down until morning before he went to see Eli. He could hardly sleep.

In the morning, Samuel opened the doors of the house of God. He was afraid to tell the vision to the priest. Eli sensed this and said to Samuel: *"Do not hide it from me. May God deal with you, be it ever so severely, if you hide from me anything he told*



you.” So Samuel told him everything, hiding nothing from him. Then Eli said, “*He is the Lord; let him do what is good in his eyes.*” I am puzzled by Eli’s response here. I thought he would cry out to God for his mercy and forgiveness for his family. But Eli seemed to have given up any hope for his sons. Nevertheless, Samuel learned a spiritual lesson that he had to tell the truth of God no matter how difficult it was. Eli, as weak as he was, did one thing right. He helped Samuel to tell the truth of God without compromise, no matter how painful it might be to the listeners.

Samuel was a faithful Bible student and a good Bible teacher. He spoke the truth of God’s word that does not fall to the ground. This is a lesson for all of us. Samuel did not become a great servant of God through one mystical experience with God. It was a sustained study and obedience of God’s word that allowed him to do great things for the Lord (4:1). Sometimes, we are excited to have a heart-moving experience at a Bible conference or revival meeting. This is good but it is not enough. We need a sustained Bible study to be a great servant of God. You can expect to be in good health by eating a sumptuous meal once and then have ramen noodle all the time. We need spiritual substance on a daily basis. This is what Samuel did. And all Israelites from Dan to Beersheba recognized him as a prophet of the Lord (19). *The Lord continued to appear at Shiloh, and there he revealed himself to Samuel through his word* (21). God firmly established Samuel as a prophet and a Bible teacher by revealing himself to Samuel through his word. And 4:1 says: *And Samuel’s word came to all Israel.* This verse a sharp contrast to 3:1b which says, “In those days the word of the Lord was rare; there were not many visions.”

Let us listen to God as we study the word of God and respond to his personal calling. Let us study the word of God faithfully so that God may reveal himself to us and we may be used in his redemptive word in our society where the word of God is rare. May God help us to be near him! May God help us to keep the lamp of God burning in our generation!