

# Hearing the Call

## WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

Last in a four-part series

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*Judges 21:25 (NIV)*

<sup>25</sup>In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit.

*1 Samuel 3:1–4:1 (NIV)*

The boy Samuel ministered before the LORD under Eli. In those days the word of the LORD was rare; there were not many visions.

<sup>2</sup>One night Eli, whose eyes were becoming so weak that he could barely see, was lying down in his usual place. <sup>3</sup>The lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the house of the LORD, where the ark of God was. <sup>4</sup>Then the LORD called Samuel.

Samuel answered, “Here I am.” <sup>5</sup>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.

<sup>6</sup>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.”

<sup>7</sup>Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD: The word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him.

<sup>8</sup>A third time the LORD called, “Samuel!” 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. <sup>9</sup>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.

<sup>10</sup>The LORD came and stood there, calling as at the other times, “Samuel! Samuel!”

Then Samuel said, “Speak, for your servant is listening.”

<sup>11</sup>And the LORD said to Samuel: “See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make the ears of everyone who hears about it tingle. <sup>12</sup>At that time I will carry out against Eli everything I spoke against his family—from beginning to end. <sup>13</sup>For I told him that I would judge his family forever because of the sin he knew about; his sons blasphemed God, and he failed to restrain them. <sup>14</sup>Therefore I swore to the house of Eli, ‘The guilt of Eli’s house will never be atoned for by sacrifice or offering.’”

<sup>15</sup>Samuel lay down until morning and then opened the doors of the house of the LORD. He was afraid to tell Eli the vision, <sup>16</sup>but Eli called him and said, “Samuel, my son.”

Samuel answered, “Here I am.”

<sup>17</sup>“What was it he said to you?” Eli asked. “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.” <sup>18</sup>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.”

<sup>19</sup>The LORD was with Samuel as he grew up, and he let none of Samuel’s words fall to the ground. <sup>20</sup>And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba recognized that Samuel was attested as a prophet of the LORD. <sup>21</sup>The LORD continued to appear at Shiloh, and there he revealed himself to Samuel through his word.

And Samuel’s word came to all Israel.

*A young boy is called to God’s work, called to lead. Similarly, each of us is called by God to work for the building of his kingdom.*

There are times in the lives of persons, organizations, and even nations that straddle periods of transition. I don’t mean just any change, but rather the move from the past to a very different future. I built a few businesses in my career and I saw first-hand that organizations reach certain stages in their growth where it seems that nearly every part of the business must learn to do things differently -- and often at considerable risk. I sometimes analogized this transition to a rocket that must shed its booster as it transitions to the next phase of its journey; you wonder if the rocket is going to stay in one piece! What you know is that there can be no turning back; you move forward and grow or you fall back

and eventually collapse. When we meet the boy Samuel, the Israelite tribes are in such a time of transition.

*The Promised Land seems to hold little promise*

It was more than a thousand years before Jesus, and darkness had fallen across the Promised Land. For nearly 200 years, the Israelites had conquered and settled Canaan. Though God had been their king,<sup>1</sup> the generations of Israelites had been caught in a descending spiral of godlessness and violence. Unwilling to embrace and live out the covenant they had made with the LORD God, “all the people did what was right in their own

### The Book of Samuel

The books of 1 and 2 Samuel are actually one long literary work. Ancient Hebrew scrolls couldn't hold the entire book of Samuel, so the book was copied onto two scrolls. This is true of the book of Kings and the book of Chronicles as well. However, it is not true of New Testament books such as 1 & 2 Corinthians or 1 & 2 Thessalonians which are all different letters written by the apostle Paul.

The book of Samuel tells the story of Israel's transition from the rule of judges to a monarchy roughly 1,000 years before Jesus. During the time of the judges, the Israelites were organized into a loose confederation of the twelve tribes. Though God was to be the king of the Israelites, the people demanded a human king like everyone else had. Samuel warned the people that they didn't understand the consequences of their demand for a king, but the people would not relent and God let them have a king. The first was Saul. Under Saul, and then David, and then Solomon the twelve tribes were organized into a monarchy with centralized wealth and military power.

Not only do kings emerge in Israel during this time, but also prophets. Israel's kings would not have the absolute freedom typical of kings in the ancient near east. Instead, the kings of Israel were subject to God and to the covenant. Israel's prophets would hold the kings (and the people!) to account. The prophet Samuel brought God's word to King Saul. Nathan did the same for David.

eyes” (Judges 21:25). In the midst of this darkness, an Israelite woman named Hannah wept bitterly because she could have no children. She prayed to God that she would conceive, promising to dedicate her child to the LORD's service if God would only grant her request. Hannah did conceive, bearing a son whom she named Samuel. True to her word, when the boy was still very young, Hannah took him to be raised in the house of the LORD at Shiloh, by Eli, the priest, and his sons. She “left him there for the Lord” (1 Samuel 1:28).<sup>2</sup>

But the darkness had settled even upon the LORD's house at Shiloh, for “the sons of Eli were scoundrels; they had no regard for the LORD” (1 Samuel 2:11). In this troubled house, all we are told about the boy Samuel is that he “continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the Lord and with the people” (2:26). Yet, Samuel's life would change dramatically in a single night.

#### *Samuel's call to ministry – and our own*

One evening, the boy is sleeping in the tent sanctuary<sup>3</sup> near the ark of the covenant when he is awakened by a voice. Thinking that he has been called by Eli, Samuel hops up and runs to Eli's room. But Eli, probably thinking that the boy has been dreaming, tells Samuel to go to bed. It happens a second time and, again, Eli sends the boy back to bed (if you are a parent, you can picture this).

Samuel is then awakened a third time and he again trundles off to Eli's room. This time, Eli seems to realize that something big is going on. Eli tells Samuel to go back and say to the LORD, “Here I am, for you called me” (3:8).

<sup>1</sup>In contrast to all the peoples around them, the Israelites at this time had no earthly king. God was to be their king. During the two hundred years or so between their entry into Canaan and the birth of Samuel, the tribes of Israel were governed by warrior leaders called judges. Samuel would be the last of the judges.

<sup>2</sup>I hope that you will take the time to read through the stories in the opening chapters of 1 Samuel. The stories are detailed and poignant. Imagine what it must have been like for Hannah to turn her beloved son over to Eli, knowing that she would see him only once a year – such commitment.

<sup>3</sup>At this time, the Ark was still kept inside a tent sanctuary. The permanent temple in Jerusalem would not be built until the reign of Solomon, well on the other side of the transition led by Samuel.

And so God calls the boy Samuel to a life of ministry, saying, “See, I am about to do something that will make both ears of anyone who hears it tingle,” for God would let none of Samuel’s words “fall to the ground” unheard. The young boy would grow to be the one who would lead Israel from the darkness of the judges to the seeming hopefulness of the first kings.

What a wonderful story of God’s call. Of course, we need to realize that God’s call is not restricted to a voice in the night. Sometimes, we might think that God’s call is restricted to those who are called to the ministry of the ordained. Indeed, I was asked a few years ago when I would answer God’s call to ministry – even though I left the business world long ago and am full-time on the staff of St. Andrew. The truth is that we are all called to ministry and we are all called to grow in our ministry. This does not mean that we are all called to work on a church staff, but it does mean that we must all examine our priorities and ask ourselves what we are doing every day to advance the kingdom of God, in our church and in the world. This is worth a deeper look.

### *Vocation*

Let’s begin with the word. “Vocation” is a direct descendent of the Latin, *vocatio*, meaning “summons” and the French, *vocare*, meaning “to call.” We often use vocation to mean our occupation, what it is that employs us full-time. We even contrast it with avocation, meaning some sort of hobby or interest – too often something we enjoy doing a lot more than our vocation! But we don’t usually link “vocation” and “calling.” Sometimes, we speak of someone having a calling when we see their passion for an occupation that seems so perfect for them. But usually, we reserve the idea of a “calling” for pastors and others who are “called” by God into ministry, like Samuel. But limiting our use of “vocation” is a mistake.

#### Samuel – The Rest of the Story

Samuel would go on to be a key transitional figure in the story of Israel. He was Israel’s last judge and the first in a line of prophets who would anoint the kings of Israel and, later, Judah.

The Israelites wanted a human king like other people had. In 1 Samuel 8, the tribal elders gathered to demand that Samuel appoint a king. God reassured Samuel that the people were rejecting God and not the judgeship of Samuel. Samuel brought to the people God’s words of warning: they would regret that they ever asked for a king, for kings are takers. But, in the end, God relented and told Samuel to anoint a young man named Saul as Israel’s first king. When Saul proved to be a big disappointment, God told Samuel to anoint David as the second king of the united Israel, even while Saul was still king.

1 Samuel 25 records Samuel’s death. We are told that “all Israel assembled and mourned for him.” However, in 1 Samuel 28, Saul calls Samuel’s ghost back from the grave to help out in a battle against the Philistines! But Samuel reminds Saul that God has handed the kingdom to David for a reason.

The key to grasping the Biblical understanding of vocation is to realize that, as Mark Roberts wrote in a series on vocation, “You don’t get a vocation without someone doing the ‘vocating.’” You can have work without relationship. You can have a job all by yourself. But a vocation only comes when you’re in relationship with someone who calls you (or better, Someone who calls you).” And God has called us all; we are all living in relationship with God. God calls a few Christians to full-time ministry, but God calls (“vocates!”) most of us to honor God’s claim on our lives by becoming faithful stewards of our gifts for ministry within the so-called secular realm.

#### *“Honoring our raw materials”*

But what does vocation, our calling, have to do with our willingness to work and to take risks for the kingdom of God? John Ortberg<sup>4</sup> calls it finding the line between “Thou shalt not be afraid” and “Thou shalt not be ridiculous.” It is being able to discern the difference between God’s call and our own rash impulses.

This begins with appreciating who we really are. We are all made in God’s image. As God has work to do, so do we.

<sup>4</sup>From Ortberg’s excellent book, *If You Want to Walk on Water, You’ve Got to Get Out of the Boat*.

Adam and Eve were given the Garden of Eden to work, before they made the tragic choice to rebel against God. And though we are all made in God's image, God has given us all differing personalities, desires, and talents that help to shape us for one sort of work or another. Ortberg writes, "To identify these [gifts] with clarity, to develop them with skill, and to use them joyfully and humbly to serve God and his creation is central to why you were created." When we are honest with ourselves and God about our gifts and limitations, we are much more likely to discover our own calling. Ortberg calls this "honoring our raw materials." When our work honors our raw materials, reality is our friend, the risks we take are much more likely to be wise.

For example, if I thought God was calling me to be an accountant, I'd be wrong. I simply lack the tools, such as a methodical attention to detail, that it takes to be a great accountant. Had I chosen that path for my life, I'd have ended up disappointed and burned out. It took me awhile to figure out that I am, at heart, a teacher and a learner. Looking back this seems obvious. When I was an Air Force pilot, I was an instructor pilot. I tutored others in finance during business school. Even when I went into the corporate world, the work I enjoyed the most was showing others that they could grow and achieve more than they ever thought possible. But looking back is easy – how do we get better at looking forward?

If someone calls to us, the key is to listen. Our vocation, the life to which God has called us, is something we discover . . . it is not something we choose. And others can help us listen better. Ortberg notes that the Quakers use what they call a "clearness committee," which comes together to help test and discern someone's perceived calling. Such a committee probably would have helped me to realize at a younger age where my gifts really lie. Many St. Andrew members are part of a small group, a connection group. These groups are a great way to listen to God and to test our own callings. The groups are a little like assembling our own "clearness committees." The truth is that I am much more likely to hear God clearly on any matter if I have a group of trusted and mature disciples helping me to listen. Are you part of such a group? Who do you rely on to tell you the truth, to help guide you on your way?

## Questions for Discussion and Reflection

In the middle of the night, God calls young Samuel to a life-long prophetic ministry. (Remember, in the Bible, prophecy refers much more to *forthtelling* than *foretelling*.) I doubt that you've heard a voice in the night, but that doesn't mean you are not called to ministry by God – you are; we all are. All Christians are called to the making of disciples. All Christians are called to a life of caring and serving. In short, all Christians are called to ministry.

A few Christians are called to a life in the ordained ministry. Others might work full-time or part-time in a church. But most Christians work at jobs and careers that are not directly related to the body of Christ. I spent many years working for one business or another. It is not hard to understand why many Christians have trouble grasping, much less embracing, their own call to ministry.

1. What do you think it means to say that all Christians are in ministry? What are we really talking about? How do you see yourself being in ministry? What does this imply for our priorities? Our commitments?
2. Let's get concrete about this. In a given week or month, how much of your time is devoted to ministry toward others? How much of your financial resources is devoted to ministry toward others? I once knew a man who lived comfortably in retirement, but went back to work so that he could give 100% of his earnings to a program of his church! What sort of ministry is that? What ministry opportunities does St. Andrew provide each of us? How does the fast growth of St. Andrew generate ministry opportunities for us all? What can we all do to become ever more effective ministers?

## Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<b>Monday, 1 Samuel 1</b> The birth of Samuel	<b>Tuesday, 1 Samuel 7:2-17</b> Samuel as the Judge of Israel
<b>Wednesday, 1 Samuel 8</b> The people demand a king and Samuel delivers a warning	<b>Thursday, 1 Samuel 12</b> Samuel addresses Israel
<b>Friday, 1 Samuel 28:3-25</b> A desperate King Saul has a medium call up the ghost of Samuel.	<b>Prayer List</b>

