



Sunday School Lesson
Scripture Text
 by Lorin L. Cranford
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God's Call to Samuel
[1 Samuel 3:1-4:1a](#)



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Quick Links to the Study

- | | |
|--|---|
| <p>I. <u>Context</u></p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">a. <u>Historical</u></p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">b. <u>Literary</u></p> | <p>II. <u>Message</u></p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">a. <u>Hearing Voices, vv. 1-9</u></p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">b. <u>God's Call, vv. 10-18</u></p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">c. <u>Growing Recognition, 3:19-4:1a</u></p> |
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With this lesson we continue a unit of studies in the Smyth-Helwys series entitled, "Is God Calling?" The focus is on character studies following the central theme of divine calling. This topic, although a long time Baptist emphasis, is both simple and complex as it unfolds in the pages of scripture. The models for divine commissioning as found in the New Testament stems from the experiences of key individuals in the Old Testament. Most especially the Hebrew prophets beginning with Amos in the eighth century B.C. stand as a major shaping force in the concept that God comes to individuals and assigns them a mission to be carried out under His leadership. But the roots of the well developed prophetic model reach back to the patriarchs in Genesis, primarily with the divine call to Abraham to leave the land of his birth in the eastern Fertile Crescent region and to migrate to the western side of the Fertile Crescent to settle in what came to be called the Land of Promise. [Genesis 12](#) describes this experience.

"Calling" can be defined [any number of ways](#). In the more technical sense, the Old Testament prophetic model defines calling as an experience of divine commissioning to deliver Yahweh's message to the Israelite people, either those in the Northern Kingdom or those in the Southern Kingdom. Thus, calling is mainly a vocational issue, although some of the prophets like Amos earned their living by other means.

The experience of the apostle Paul in the New Testament builds off this prophetic model, but at the same time combines another dimension of "calling" that is the dominate perspective in the New Testament. "Calling" in the New Testament is overwhelmingly a divine summons to salvation through a faith commitment to Christ. Paul's calling described by Luke in [Acts 9](#) and by Paul himself in [Gal. 1:13-17](#) collapses both these aspects into a single experience. When God called Paul to salvation, He also called him to preach -- in the same encounter. Paul is the only person in the New Testament to have such an experience as this; at least the only one who is so described in the pages of the New Testament. This immediately raises the question of whether Paul's experience was unique or normative. Most likely, the former is more accurate.

The dominant word group in the New Testament translated as "[call](#)" etc. comes from the verb καλέω (kaleo, "[to call](#)," 139 NT uses) and its cognates, the noun κλήσις ([klesis](#), "call/calling," 11 NT uses), and the adjective κλέτος (kletos, "[elect](#)," 10 NT uses). Compound forms of the verb that relate to this idea include ἐπικαλέομαι ([epikaleomai](#), "to call," 30 NT uses), μετακαλέω ([metakaleo](#), "to call," 4 NT uses), προσκαλέομαι (proskaleomai, "[to call to](#)," 29 NT uses), and συγκαλέω (sugkaleo, "[to call together](#)," 8 NT uses). Almost never do these terms in the New Testament allude to a vocational calling. Instead, they focus on a divine summons to salvation when used beyond the merely human meaning of using the voice to make a sound. But Luke picks up the Old Testament commissioning model beginning with Abraham and develops a distinct literary form found mostly in Acts called "[Commissioning Narratives](#)." [These texts](#) depict God

addressing specific individuals or groups of individuals with the assigning to them of a divine mission that they must carry out. Usually these assignments are not lifelong vocational tasks, but are specific to a limited point of time, such as the calling of Paul and Barnabas to the first missionary journey in [Acts 13:1-3](#).

The use of [some 35 words](#) in Hebrew relate to the verbal idea of “to call.” But again the idea only rarely refers to a divine “calling” to ministry. Overwhelmingly, these terms allude to a human calling out to another person for some purpose, e.g., to call for help in a time of difficulty.

All this to say that any study of “divine call” in the Bible, such as we’re undertaking in these series of lessons, cannot be based merely on a word study of either the Hebrew or the Greek texts. The examples that emerge from the Bible provide the main source of understanding of this concept. Our modern label “calling” is a convenient label for the models found in scripture, but can’t be legitimately based on any underlying terminology in either Hebrew or Greek.

With the study of individuals such as Samuel, perhaps our understanding of divine call will be expanded to include much more than a vocational calling to religious ministry. Very likely, we need to jettison the term “vocational calling”, since in both the OT and the NT the ideas of vocation and ministry do not naturally connect to one another. Vocation was what one did to make a living; ministry was service to others in the name of God. These were usually two very different things from one another in biblical perspective. For the most part, ministry wasn’t a source of income or livelihood in either the Old Testament or the New Testament eras. This is a much later developing concept after the beginning century of Christianity.

I. Context

a. Historical

As we often noted with documents in the Old Testament, the external history determination of who wrote the document, along with the when, where, to whom and why questions, are much more difficult to answer, than for the documents of the New Testament. To a certain extent, they are then not quite as important to answer decisively as for, say, the letters in the New Testament. But we will give some attention to the external history, and then to the internal history, since it has more impact on the interpretation of chapter three of 1 Samuel.

The external history for 1 Samuel is one of the more complicated issues in studying the Old Testament. No author for the document is identified inside the book itself. A part of the background for this stems from the organization of this part of the Old Testament beginning with the original Hebrew text and proceeding to the Greek translation of it called the Septuagint (LXX). Randall Bailey has a helpful summation of this in the *Eerdmans’ Dictionary of the Bible* (“Samuel, Books of”; Logos):

First and Second Samuel, included in the Former Prophets of the Hebrew canon, which is regarded as part of the Deuteronomistic history. In the Hebrew Bible Samuel was one book, but in the LXX it was divided into two books and appears as part of a four-volume collection in the historical books entitled 1–4 Kings, corresponding to 1-2 Samuel and 1-2 Kings. The name of the book probably derives from the first key character, Samuel, who appears as priest (1 Sam. 3), judge/charismatic leader (ch. 7), and prophet (chs. 8–28). Samuel does not appear in 2 Samuel.

Quite obviously Samuel did not write this material since it covers a time period extending several centuries after Samuel’s death. The inclusion in the deuteronomistic history indicates an exilic or post-exilic date of origin for the document, at least in the form that we know. In light of this, the issue of sources used by the scribes for the assimilation of the material has preoccupied Old Testament scholars working in this area for the past several centuries. Again, Bailey has a helpful summation of this challenge:

Because of the many text critical problems, source critical work on authorship was not fully developed until the early 20th century. One marked feature of the book is the several duplicate narratives, such as the rise of Saul to kingship (1 Sam. 8; 9:1–10:16; 10:17–27; 11); the rejection of Saul as king (chs. 13, 15); David’s arrival at the court of Saul (16:14–23; 18); David and Goliath (ch. 17); David and Jonathan’s discussion of Saul’s attempts to kill David (chs. 19, 20); David’s sparing Saul’s life (chs. 24, 26); the death of Saul (1 Sam. 31; 2 Sam. 1); and lists of David’s officials (2 Sam. 8:15–18; 20:23–26). The position of these duplicate narratives in the book underscores their disagreements. For instance, in 1 Sam. 19 Jonathan tells David about Saul’s plot to kill him, while in ch. 20,

when David reports the plot Jonathan is ignorant of it. Had the chapters been reversed, the plot line would be smoother and the duplication less problematic.

The earliest source critical studies therefore attempted to trace the pentateuchal sources J and E into Samuel, along with some recognition of Deuteronomistic materials as a way of explaining the duplication. Others attempted to identify pro- and antimonarchic sources. However, unlike in the Pentateuch the differences in the duplicate accounts lack sufficient continuity to argue for continuous sources. Still others suggest a prophetic source to account for the duplicates.

Generally, contemporary viewpoints on this matter fall into a two or three source perspective, with the discussion continuing at a lively pace among OT scholars who work in this field.

The internal history pertains to the person of Samuel himself. Because of the issues of multiple sources used for the contents of first and second Samuel, a reconstruction of the life of Samuel runs up against several challenges. As S. Szikszai in "Samuel," *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (iPreach) says, "A reconstruction of the historical data of the life of Samuel encounters great difficulties, for there are irreconcilable differences within the biblical tradition concerning Samuel. The sources of the books of Samuel (see SAMUEL, I-II, § C2) themselves introduce marked contrasts into the portrayal of Samuel." The E source contains the majority of material about Samuel mostly found in the early chapters of 1 Samuel, while the J source is interested in Samuel only as he related to Saul and the L source includes only one tidbit of information about Samuel in [1 Sam. 10:21b-17](#). Elsewhere in the Old Testament, as Prof. Szikszai notes, "Samuel was remembered as a great intercessor, second only to Moses (Jer. 15:1; cf. Ps. 99:6). The Chronicler's genealogical table lists Samuel as one of the "sons of Levi" (1 Chr. 6:28). He and David are credited with the establishment of the office of gatekeepers who guarded the tent of meeting (9:22). The rabbinical tradition which ascribes the partial authorship of the books of Samuel to the prophet Samuel (B.B. 15a) also finds its roots in the Chronicles (1 Chr. 29:29)."

Bruce Birch in "Samuel," *Eerdmans' Dictionary of the Bible* (Logos) sums up Samuel's life in a helpful manner:

Samuel gave leadership to Israel in the critical period of transition from tribal existence under the judges to the establishment of monarchy. He is the central character of the first half of 1 Samuel, which bears his name. In these stories he appears in multiple roles of authority: priest, prophet, judge, military leader. Samuel occupies a unique role in Israel's story. He is the representative and defender of an older tribal covenant order in Israel, yet he is God's prophetic agent for ushering in the new day of kingship.

b. Literary

Chapter three of 1 Samuel deals with the call of Samuel by God. Its context is summarized by Prof. Birch as follows:

Samuel's birth story (1 Sam. 1) reports that his father Elkanah was an Ephraimite from Ramathaim-zophim. His mother Hannah was barren and was given the child Samuel as God's response to her fervent prayer. In return she devoted the boy to the service of the Lord, and he came to Shiloh to serve under the priest Eli, presumably to take up priestly duties himself. In a direct revelatory experience from the Lord (1 Sam. 3) Samuel is given an oracle to deliver to Eli denouncing the corruption that Eli's sons have brought on the priesthood and announcing judgment against Israel and the house of Eli (3:11–14). From this beginning Samuel becomes widely recognized in Israel as a prophet (1 Sam. 3:19–4:1a). When the Philistines defeat Israel and capture the ark, Eli's sons are killed and Eli himself collapses in death (1 Sam. 4:10–18). Later texts indicate that Shiloh was also destroyed at this time (cf. Jer. 7:14; 26:9).

II. Message

The above assessment of the call narrative will serve as the organizing key to our study of chapter three of 1 Samuel.

a. Hearing Voices, vv. 1-9

NASB

1 Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the LORD before Eli. And word from the LORD was rare in those days, visions were infre-

NRSV

1 Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord under Eli. The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not wide-

NLT

1 Meanwhile, the boy Samuel was serving the LORD by assisting Eli. Now in those days messages from the LORD were very

quent. 2 It happened at that time as Eli was lying down in his place (now his eyesight had begun to grow dim *and* he could not see *well*;) 3 and 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,} 4 that the LORD called Samuel; and he said, "Here I am." 5 Then he 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 The LORD called yet again, "Samuel!" So Samuel arose and went to Eli and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he answered, "I did not call, my son, lie down again." 7 Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, nor had the word of the LORD yet been revealed to him. 8 So the LORD called Samuel again for the third time. And he arose and went to Eli and said, "Here I am, for you called me." Then Eli discerned that the LORD was calling the boy. 9 And Eli said to Samuel, "Go lie down, and it shall be if He calls you, that you shall say, 'Speak, LORD, for Your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place.

spread. 2 At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; 3 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. 4 Then the Lord called, "Samuel! 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 The Lord called again, "Samuel!" Samuel got up 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. 8 The Lord called Samuel again, a third time. And he got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." Then Eli perceived that the Lord was calling the boy. 9 Therefore Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place.

rare, and visions were quite uncommon. 2 One night Eli, who was almost blind by now, had just gone to bed. 3 The lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was sleeping in the Tabernacle near the Ark of God. 4 Suddenly, the LORD called out, "Samuel! Samuel!" "Yes?" Samuel replied. "What is it?" 5 He jumped up and ran to Eli. "Here I am. What do you need?" "I didn't call you," Eli replied. "Go on back to bed." So he did. 6 Then the LORD called out again, "Samuel!" Again Samuel jumped up and ran to Eli. "Here I am," he said. "What do you need?" "I didn't call you, my son," Eli said. "Go on back to bed." 7 Samuel did not yet know the LORD because he had never had a message from the LORD before. 8 So now the LORD called a third time, and once more Samuel jumped up and ran to Eli. "Here I am," he said. "What do you need?" Then Eli realized it was the LORD who was calling the boy. 9 So he said to Samuel, "Go and lie down again, and if someone calls again, say, 'Yes, LORD, your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went back to bed.

Comments:

The historical setting for this narrative is while Samuel was serving in the worship center at [Shiloh](#) (see map on next page for location), after the conquest of the Land of Canaan under Joshua. In 1:1, Samuel's mother and father lived at Ramathaim, which is located most likely about sixteen miles east of the modern Tel Aviv in the tribal territory of Ephraim. In the New Testament it is known as Arimathea (Matt. 27:57). Interestingly, most of the references after 1:18 to Samuel's home in 1 Samuel call his home Ramah, which was most likely the Benjamite city of er-Ram, located some five miles northwest of Jerusalem. After Hannah's prayer for a son (1 Sam. 1) was



Shiloh, the Place of the Tabernacle



answered, she took him to the worship center at Shiloh to dedicate him to the Lord as she had promised (1 Sam. 1:21-2:10). After returning home, she was blessed with other children (1 Sam. 2:18-21), while the young boy Samuel continued to live with the old prophet Eli. He grew up in Eli's house learning the things of God, while Eli's own sons turned evil and did many wicked things before God (1 Sam. 2:11-17, 22-36).

Our passage depicts a moment of time toward the end of Eli's life and comes as a fulfillment of a prophecy that had been delivered to Eli saying that God had rejected Eli's sons and was going to raise up a true prophet who would be faithful to Him (1 Sam. 2:34-36). Shiloh had become the [center of worship](#) for the Israelites after the conquest. The Tabernacle was set up there ([Joshua 18:1-10](#)), containing the Ark of the Covenant among other things, until the Philistines captured the Ark during the time of Eli and Samuel ([1 Sam. 4](#)), the next episode after our passage.

In light of the problems with Eli's sons, God had pretty much ceased revealing Himself to the priestly leadership of the Israelites. But, beginning with verse two, God appears to the young boy Samuel. Such a passage is called a

theophany (narrative where God appears and speaks directly to someone). The text frames this as "the word of the Lord," which in Hebrew is the "technical designation for the revelation given to the prophets," according to Ralph Klein in *1 Samuel* (vol. 10 in the *Word Biblical Commentary*, p. 32).

The revelation took place at night and focused on the boy Samuel who was sleeping near the Ark in the sanctuary at Shiloh. The reference to the "lamp of God" not yet going out (v. 3) evidently casts the event as taking place just before dawn, if the reference in [Ex. 27:21](#) applies here regarding the burning of a lamp before the altar from evening to morning. Three times God spoke to the young boy, and each time Samuel thought it was Eli, who was sleeping in another room in the sanctuary, calling him. Eli instructed him to go lie back down, but the third time realized that God was speaking (v. 8b), and thus instructed Samuel to respond to the voice with the proper religious response, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening" (v. 9). Klein believes that "the threefold call functions as a prelude to the divine message by insuring that Samuel is awake and ready to listen" (WBC, p. 33).

What can we learn from these verses? From the larger contextual background, one lesson becomes clear: God has trouble working with his people when they are living in sinful rebellion against him, and this especially applies to religious leaders. Eli had been largely reduced down to a meaningless administrator of the worship center at Shiloh. The corruption of his two sons eventually led to divine wrath being poured out on both Eli and his sons ([1 Sam. 2:30-36](#)), as well as on Eli's family at large. They would be reduced to poverty and premature death. The two sons would be executed on the same day ([1 Sam. 2:34](#), promised; [1 Sam. 4:11](#), took place). News of their death brought about the old prophet's death ([1 Sam. 4:12-18](#)), and a daughter-in-law's giving birth to a grandson named Ichabod ("The glory of the Lord has departed from Israel") marked the occasion ([1 Sam. 4:19-22](#)) of his death and the loss of the Ark. If the people of God are to be lead effectively, they need genuinely spiritual leaders. Hophni and Phinehas failed miserably to fill that role, and everyone suffered. The same thing holds true today.

On the encouraging side, these verses affirm to us that God is capable of raising up genuinely spiritual

leaders for his people. In the midst of God's displeasure with Eli and his sons, He was working to remedy the problem with the calling of Samuel. So there was hope in the midst of gloom for the Israelites during this period of their history.

The older I become the more I realize this mixed bag of good and bad religious leadership still holds true in our world. As I have listened to Baptist preaching over the years, I have frequently been appalled at the distortion and flat out ignorance of God's Word as reflected in sermons coming from the pulpit. Yet, on occasion a ray of bright sunlight shines through when I hear a preacher treat God's Word with reverence and honestly seek to proclaim it truthfully.

For every religious leader, Eli's instruction to the young boy Samuel remains relevant. The only proper response to God should be "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." When that happens, God's blessings come in abundance.

b. God's Call, vv. 10-18

NASB

10 Then the LORD came and stood and called as at other times, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for Your servant is listening." 11 The LORD said to Samuel, "Behold, I am about to do a thing in Israel at which both ears of everyone who hears it will tingle. 12 "In that day I will carry out against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. 13 "For I have told him that I am about to judge his house forever for the iniquity which he knew, because his sons brought a curse on themselves and he did not rebuke them. 14 "Therefore I have sworn to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be atoned for by sacrifice or offering forever." 15 So Samuel lay down until morning. Then he opened the doors of the house of the LORD. But Samuel was afraid to tell the vision to Eli. 16 Then Eli called Samuel and said, "Samuel, my son." And he said, "Here I am." 17 He said, "What is the word that He spoke to you? Please do not hide it from me. May God do so to you, and more also, if you hide anything from me of all the words that He spoke to you." 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."

NRSV

10 Now the Lord came and stood there, calling as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening." 11 Then the Lord said to Samuel, "See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle. 12 On that day I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. 13 For I have told him that I am about to punish his house forever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them. 14 Therefore I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be expiated by sacrifice or offering forever." 15 Samuel lay there until morning; then he opened the doors of the house of the Lord. Samuel was afraid to tell the vision to Eli. 16 But Eli called Samuel and said, "Samuel, my son." He said, "Here I am." 17 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." 18 So Samuel told him everything and hid nothing from him. Then he said, "It is the Lord; let him do what seems good to him."

NLT

10 And the LORD came and called as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel replied, "Yes, your servant is listening." 11 Then the LORD said to Samuel, "I am about to do a shocking thing in Israel. 12 I am going to carry out all my threats against Eli and his family. 13 I have warned him continually that judgment is coming for his family, because his sons are blaspheming God and he hasn't disciplined them. 14 So I have vowed that the sins of Eli and his sons will never be forgiven by sacrifices or offerings." 15 Samuel stayed in bed until morning, then got up and opened the doors of the Tabernacle as usual. He was afraid to tell Eli what the LORD had said to him. 16 But Eli called out to him, "Samuel, my son." "Here I am," Samuel replied. 17 "What did the LORD say to you? Tell me everything. And may God punish you if you hide anything from me!" 18 So Samuel told Eli everything; he didn't hold anything back. "It is the LORD's will," Eli replied. "Let him do what he thinks best."

Comments:

These verses first describe the appearance of God to Samuel (vv. 10-14), then Samuel's recounting of his experience to Eli (vv. 15-18).

When God spoke to Samuel a fourth time (v. 10), Samuel responded with the appropriate words that Eli had given him. God then spelled out His intention to carry out His earlier promise to severely punish the house of Eli for its sins. The tone of these words stresses the intensity of God's wrath to fall upon Eli:

v. 11 --"See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle" --;

v. 13-- "I am about to punish his house forever"--;

v. 14 -- "Therefore I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be expiated by sacrifice or offering forever."

The expression "ringing ears" (cf. 2 Kings 21:12) emphasizes the awesome impact of God's action on those who see it, somewhat like a sudden, explosive noise that overwhelms our eardrums. The extent of God's punishment is defined as "from beginning to end" (v. 12) and will last "forever" (v. 13). The determination of God to carry out His punishment is stressed in verse 14 with the declaration that nothing can deter the pouring out of His anger on Eli's house.

A natural conclusion of reading these intense words is to ask what in the world did they do to cause such punishment? The basis of guilt asserted in these verses is set forth in verse 13b: "for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them." Eli knew what his sons were doing and did nothing to stop them. Therefore, God's anger was focused on the prophet's household, not just the two sons.

A side-note. In most modern translations you will notice a footnote indicating a different reading of the scripture text in verse 13. The Masoretic Hebrew (MT) text reads "his sons were blaspheming for themselves" rather than the LXX reading "his sons were blaspheming God." Ralph Klein supplies the answer to this textual variation (WBC, p. 30), the "MT's '(to) themselves' is one of the Tiquen Sopherim (emendations of the scribes), who apparently did not want readers to have to pronounce the words 'cursing God.'"

The description of the reason for God's wrath here alludes to an earlier reference in [1 Samuel 2:12-17](#) (NRSV):

12 Now the sons of Eli were scoundrels; they had no regard for the Lord 13 or for the duties of the priests to the people. When anyone offered sacrifice, the priest's servant would come, while the meat was boiling, with a three-pronged fork in his hand, 14 and he would thrust it into the pan, or kettle, or caldron, or pot; all that the fork brought up the priest would take for himself. This is what they did at Shiloh to all the Israelites who came there. 15 Moreover, before the fat was burned, the priest's servant would come and say to the one who was sacrificing, "Give meat for the priest to roast; for he will not accept boiled meat from you, but only raw." 16 And if the man said to him, "Let them burn the fat first, and then take whatever you wish," he would say, "No, you must give it now; if not, I will take it by force." 17 Thus the sin of the young men was very great in the sight of the Lord; for they treated the offerings of the Lord with contempt.

The prophet that God sent to Eli had included Eli in the guilt of his sons actions ([1 Sam. 2:27-29](#); NRSV):

27 A man of God came to Eli and said to him, "Thus the Lord has said, "I revealed myself to the family of your ancestor in Egypt when they were slaves to the house of Pharaoh. 28 I chose him out of all the tribes of Israel to be my priest, to go up to my altar, to offer incense, to wear an ephod before me; and I gave to the family of your ancestor all my offerings by fire from the people of Israel. 29 Why then look with greedy eye at my sacrifices and my offerings that I commanded, and honor your sons more than me by fattening yourselves on the choicest parts of every offering of my people Israel?"

This is not to ignore Eli's earlier criticism and confrontation of his sons, as described in [1 Sam. 2:22-25](#); NRSV):

22 Now Eli was very old. He heard all that his sons were doing to all Israel, and how they lay with the women who served at the entrance to the tent of meeting. 23 He said to them, "Why do you do such things? For I hear of your evil dealings from all these people. 24 No, my sons; it is not a good report that I hear the people of the Lord spreading abroad. 25 If one person sins against another, someone can intercede for the sinner with the Lord; but if someone sins against the Lord, who can make intercession?" But they would not listen to the voice of their father; for it was the will of the Lord to kill them.

Again, Ralph Klein has a helpful summation (WBC, p. 33): "No possibility of atonement for their sins is envisioned. Since the sacrifices and meal offerings were things greedily coveted by the sons of Eli (2:17, 29) and were,

therefore, the occasion for their sin, how could these same sacrifices ever offer any means of expiation? Under other circumstances expiation for priestly offenses was considered possible (Lev. 4:3-12), but the sins there discussed were 'unwitting,' not the high-handed kinds of sins which Hophini and Phinehas had committed."

The words of the Lord left Samuel unnerved (vv. 15-18). The next morning Eli detected something had happened and demanded a full explanation from Samuel. The young boy then gave the old prophet a detailed account of what God had said. To Eli's credit, he took this description with stoic acceptance (v. 18b, NRSV): "It is the Lord; let him do what seems good to him."

Next, the connection question: What spiritual lessons can we learn from these verses? Of course, the most obvious truth is that God punishes sin and those who sin. To these religious leaders who had charge of the tabernacle, their punishment was more severe because they abused their sacred position before God. Centuries later Jesus would echo this same principle in Luke 12:47-48 (NRSV): "47 That slave who knew what his master wanted, but did not prepare himself or do what was wanted, will receive a severe beating. 48 But the one who did not know and did what deserved a beating will receive a light beating. From everyone **to whom much has been given, much will be required**; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded." And then James would echo it also in 3:1 (NRSV): "Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness."

We do ourselves great harm spiritually by ignoring this side of our God. He loves us unbelievably, but He also places great expectation upon us as His children. Failure to take those expectations seriously entails the danger of His anger and wrath being poured out on us.

c. Growing Recognition, 3:19-4:1

NASB

19 Thus Samuel grew and the LORD was with him and let none of his words fail. 20 All Israel from Dan even to Beersheba knew that Samuel was confirmed as a prophet of the LORD. 21 And the LORD appeared again at Shiloh, because the LORD revealed Himself to Samuel at Shiloh by the word of the LORD. 4:1a Thus the word of Samuel came to all Israel.

NRSV

19 As Samuel grew up, the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. 20 And all Israel from Dan to Beer-sheba knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the Lord. 21 The Lord continued to appear at Shiloh, for the Lord revealed himself to Samuel at Shiloh by the word of the Lord. 4:1a Thus the word of Samuel came to all Israel.

NLT

19 As Samuel grew up, the LORD was with him, and everything Samuel said was wise and helpful. 20 All the people of Israel from one end of the land to the other knew that Samuel was confirmed as a prophet of the LORD. 21 The LORD continued to appear at Shiloh and gave messages to Samuel there at the Tabernacle. 4:1a And Samuel's words went out to all the people of Israel.

Comments:

The story line now shifts back to a positive note about Samuel. This passage continues a theme underscored several times earlier:

1 Sam. [1:25-28](#) (NRSV): "25 Then they slaughtered the bull, and they brought the child to Eli. 26 And she said, "Oh, my lord! As you live, my lord, I am the woman who was standing here in your presence, praying to the Lord. 27 For this child I prayed; and the Lord has granted me the petition that I made to him. 28 Therefore I have lent him to the Lord; as long as he lives, he is given to the Lord."

1 Sam. [2:11](#) (NRSV): "11 Then Elkanah went home to Ramah, while the boy remained to minister to the Lord, in the presence of the priest Eli."

1 Sam. [2:18-21](#) (NRSV): "18 Samuel was ministering before the Lord, a boy wearing a linen ephod. 19 His mother used to make for him a little robe and take it to him each year, when she went up with her husband to offer the yearly sacrifice. 20 Then Eli would bless Elkanah and his wife, and say, "May the Lord repay you with children by this woman for the gift that she made to the Lord"; and then they would return to their home. 21 And the Lord took note of Hannah; she conceived and bore three sons and two daughters. And the boy Samuel grew up in the presence of the Lord."

1 Sam. [2:26](#) (NRSV): "26 Now the boy Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the Lord and with the people."

1 Sam. 2:35-36 (NRSV): "35 I will raise up for myself a faithful priest, who shall do according to what is in my heart and in my mind. I will build him a sure house, and he shall go in and out before my anointed one forever. 36 Everyone who is left in your family shall come to implore him for a piece of silver or a loaf of bread, and shall say, Please put me in one of the priest's places, that I may eat a morsel of bread.' "

God's hand of blessing was upon Samuel from the beginning. His mother had prayed him into being and then dedicated him to the Lord. That God would then use him in significant ministry is not all that surprising. These verses, 3:19-4:1a, mark a transition point in the text of 1 Samuel. The next episodes describe the demise of Eli's household with Samuel assuming the priestly role of Eli, as well as the role of a prophet who delivered God's message to the covenant people.

The Sunday School lesson theme is divine calling. Although Samuel's experience in 1 Samuel 3 is similar in some respects to God's calling of the prophets beginning in the eighth century (Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Jeremiah etc.), it is also very different from them. The language of prophetic calling is used in chapter three, but Samuel's experience was an initial encounter with God who delivered a hard message to be delivered to a beloved father figure, Eli. Samuel's spiritual development and early service in the Tabernacle is described in language of dedication and consistent growth. He wasn't a wild, rebellious person whom God had to first reign in before becoming useful. Nor was he some religious fanatic like Saul of Tarsus who had to be dramatically redirected in order to become useful. Instead, everything about Samuel's birth and childhood pointed toward usefulness in ministry to the Lord.



All of this to say that God works in a variety of ways in calling us to serve Him. Every experience of our life can be used as preparation for service. Dedicated parents and extensive religious training in our formative years can be invaluable, as they were with Samuel.

The one decisive emphasis of this final section of our scripture text is that God's hand of blessing was upon Samuel. And that this was evident to people around Samuel. This divine blessing on Samuel then translated into a blessing for all Israel (4:1a): "And the word of Samuel came to all Israel."

When God speaks to us, it is for us to become a channel of His blessing to others. Not just for our benefit alone. May we never loose sight of this!