

Defining Moments

Week 3 – The Call of Samuel

This is the third week of a five-part series we are calling “Defining Moments”. For most all of us, when we evaluate a single experience or even a season of our life, we don’t judge the experience as a whole. Rather, we tend to judge and evaluate experiences based on specific *moments* that come to stand for the whole. This is why two people can attend the same event and walk out of it with completely different opinions about the experience. Their minds have fixated on different moments.

Moments matter because they come to stand for How we view the world. Moments matter because they form a kind of lens through which we understand ourselves, our world, our place in the world, our relationships, and God. Moments matter, and some moments matter *more*. Defining Moments are brief experiences, so brimming with meaning that they bring definition and clarity into our lives. There are different kinds of defining moments. They help us to define where we are and where we are going.

When it comes to faith, moments matter for *three reasons*: *First, God uses moments in your life to connect you to his purpose and plan for your life* and to encourage you to grow in trust for him. Everyone I know is growing in trust can recall those moments. And those moments aren’t just frozen experiences from the past, but they recall those moments to help them continue to grow in the future. Our role is to be on the lookout for those moments and pay attention to them.

Second, Moments are also key for understanding ourselves. Some of your greatest fears or deepest hurts can be traced back to a few moments. You may be held back by a moment that happened a long time ago. If you recognize and understand those moments, God can help you break their power over you.

Third, we can leverage moments to love others. As human beings we have a fundamental need to be understood. And so, understanding others and their perspective can be greatly improved by knowing their defining moment. In addition, we can create and shape moments that express our love for people or help them to overcome their hurts and hang ups. You can use moments to recognize people in your life or to teach them valuable lessons.

Today we are looking at a Defining Moment of a hero from the Bible and how it applies to us. We are looking at a defining moment early in the life of the prophet Samuel. And the moment he experienced is one, I believe, God wants to give to each and every one of you.

Samuel lived 1100 years before Christ. At the time of Samuel's birth, Israel had moved into the Promised Land after 40 years of wandering in the desert. But their troubles were not over. During this time Israel was a loose confederation of tribes, held together by leaders called Judges. People like Gideon and Samson...their stories are related in the Bible in the Book of Judges.

Samuel lived in a period of crisis and transition. There was a great leadership vacuum that was felt throughout the nation. Samuel stepped into that vacuum. And he transitioned the nation from a tribal culture to a United Kingdom eventually under the leadership of Israel's greatest leader of all, King David. The passage we are looking at today is the defining moment that launched Samuel into his great and historic role. A moment long before he knew fame and influence. A seemingly insignificant moment, when he was a nobody and nobody else paid any attention to him.

In our first reading today, it says, *During the time young Samuel was minister to the Lord under Eli, the word of the Lord was scarce and vision infrequent.* (1 Samuel 3.1)

Samuel grew up working for the priest Eli who was the high priest at the time, in a sense the spiritual leader of the nation. When scripture says, *"the word of the Lord was scarce and vision infrequent"* this was a commentary on Eli's leadership. While he was not a bad man, he was a weak one, and lazy too. His poor leadership began with his own family. His sons abused their power. Eli's sons were an embarrassment to him. They did a lot of very bad things, and yet Eli couldn't lead them out of trouble. He couldn't lead the nation out of trouble either.

The story continues, *one day Eli was asleep in his usual place. His eyes had lately grown so weak that he could not see.* (1 Samuel 3:2)

Again, Scripture subtly tells us of Eli's poor leadership. There was no vision for the nation because Eli could not see what was going on or what was ahead. He

was so weak he could not see where God was leading the nation him to serve the nation.

During this time in the story, Samuel is asleep in the Temple of the Lord. This “Temple” would have been more of a tent than the permanent structure that was later built in Jerusalem by King Solomon. The tent housed the Ark of the Covenant, which contained the Ten Commandments. It was the most sacred place in all of Israel, the “holy of holies.” Samuel was sleeping there when God called out to him. But Samuel believes it is Eli who called him. He runs to Eli, who tells him he’s mistaken.

The story continues when the Lord calls Samuel a second time: *Again the Lord called Samuel, who rose and went to Eli. “Here I am,” he said. “You called me.” But he answered, “I did not call you my son. Go back to sleep.” Samuel did not recognize the Lord, since the word of the Lord had not been revealed to him. (1 Samuel 3:6-7)*

Samuel at this point in his life does not recognize the voice of the Lord. Even though he spent all his time in the Temple, he didn’t recognize God when he encountered him. Same thing happens again for the third time: *The Lord called to Samuel, for the third time. Getting up and going to Eli, he said, “Here I am. You called me.” Then Eli understood that the Lord was calling the youth. (1 Samuel 3:8)*

Samuel still thinks that Eli is calling. But after a third time, it is Eli who finally gets what’s going on. At this point, he gives Samuel a little piece of advice. A piece of *spiritual advice* that forever changes his life. And do you know what? This advice could possibly change your life too. If you put this piece of advice into action in your life, it could be a defining moment in your relationship with God *and* bring more purpose and significance to your life.

By putting this principle into practice, many of the aspects of your life might come into focus and start to make more sense. You might have a much clearer sense of direction. I would go so far to say that you might understand the meaning of your life and your place in this world in a way you did not before, in a way you could not on your own. That’s what happened to Samuel.

Before I tell you what Eli said to Samuel, let me warn you: this advice is incredibly, ridiculously simple. It is sooo simple that you might be tempted to

dismiss it out of hand. But don't. This is one of the basic challenges of the Christian life. We often fail to experience God because it is so simple and not at all complicated. It is so simple we fail to see it. That's what happened to Eli and Samuel; over and over again they failed to see what was going on. Most spiritual practices are ordinary and simple, but powerful because they access the power of God and this one is no exception.

So, here is the groundbreaking advice Eli gives to Samuel, that changes his life. Eli tells Samuel **"go back to bed."** No. That is not the groundbreaking advice. The advice is, wait for the Lord to call you and when he does, then say *Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.* (1 Samuel 3.9) That's it! When you have the impression or feeling that God is trying to get your attention and speaking to you. Respond to God and say, *Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.* (1 Samuel 3.9) Pretty simple advice, and the moment he starts using it, it changes everything. *Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.* (1 Samuel 3.9)

Scripture tells us that God then reveals to Samuel that there is going to be a change of leadership in Israel, Eli will be out, and Samuel will be in. God reveals to Samuel his vision and plan for his life, what he is planning on doing through him. *Samuel grew up, and the Lord was with him, not permitting any word of his to go unfulfilled.* (1 Samuel 3:19) From this point forward, God was with him and not one of Samuel's words went unfulfilled. Samuel learned to tune into God so well that when he spoke God's words, they never returned to him void but were always effective. Because he was effectively listening to the Lord, he was speaking more effectively to everyone else.

The Christian life can contain moments of incredible impact and significance, power and grace. But it doesn't begin there. Bold deeds and historic achievements are instead the fruit of simple obedience and the humility to listen. It is as simple as listening to the voice of God and being available to him to listen to him. To hear him speak we have to listen. How do we do that? We listen by establishing a daily quiet time, even if only 5 or 6 minutes a day. Make it the same time and place every day and you're more likely to stick with it. You can do it in your car or walking your dog. We listen by seeking zones of silence in our days, apart from technology and noise and clutter of our culture. We listen to God by reading God's word, by spending time in Scripture. God uses choirs of angels and stars rising in the East, sometimes for sure. But more often he uses quiet moments and silence to communicate.

Your relationship with God *will change* the moment that you recognize that God wants to communicate with you, that he has basic and practical advice he can share with you on a daily basis, to help you, to lead you, to guide you. Until you have that moment, your relationship with God will be stunted. God will be a category, a class, an obligation an idea, an insurance policy. God will not be of real practical daily help.

It is interesting isn't it, Samuel had grown up in the Temple. He had lived at the Temple from an early age, at the place where God was most present, and yet, and yet until he deliberately disposed himself to listen to the Lord. He couldn't recognize the voice of the Lord. Some people are like that in church, aren't they? They attend church their whole lifelong, but they've never heard the Lord speak to them. They don't recognize his voice when he does speak.

Samuel's life changed and he began an incredibly significant and successful life a life of historic impact, when he said, *Speak Lord, your servant is listening.* It's that simple. God wants to speak to you, but you have to believe he wants to speak to you. And you have to believe that so much, that you are willing to invest time in it. *Speak Lord your servant is listening.* Pray it every day. It could be your defining moment.