

# Continuous Partial Attention (The Age of Interruption)

I Samuel 3:1-10

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By

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To the extent possible, effort has been made to preserve the quality of the spoken word in this written adaptation.

Continuous partial attention (CPA) is the process of paying simultaneous attention to a number of sources of incoming information, but at a superficial level. The term was coined by Linda Stone in 1998.<sup>1</sup> It drives my wife crazy, for example, when I watch television with the remote in hand, changing stations during the commercials to see how the other sporting events are coming along. The basketball game becomes golf that then becomes football. Author Steven Johnson describes this as a kind of multitasking. “It usually involves skimming the surface of the incoming data, picking out the relevant details, and moving on to the next stream. You’re paying attention, but only partially. That lets you cast a wider net, but it also runs the risk of keeping you from really studying the fish.”<sup>2</sup>

Currently, we live in the “Information Age”, being exposed to a huge amount of information and data. The internet has enhanced our accessibility to information, offering real-time connectivity and accessibility to tons of information which may disrupt our daily lives. For this reason, the term has evolved from the Information Age to the “Age of Interruption”, characterized by an overabundance of information. People are constantly interrupted by emails, spam, Facebook, Tweets, text messages, and cell phone calls, making attention a scarce resource in our time. Have you ever been with someone who is constantly checking their phone over lunch or dinner? Makes you feel like you’re not interesting enough to command their attention, doesn’t it?

Stone has clarified that continuous partial attention is not the same as multi-tasking. Where multi-tasking is driven by a conscious desire to be productive and efficient, CPA is an automatic process, motivated only by “a desire to be a live presence on the network”. It is driven by the willingness to connect and stay connected, scanning the best opportunities, activities and contacts in an effort to not miss anything that is going on.

The state of continuous partial attention can be functional. However, it leads to a higher level of stress in the brain, prohibiting reflection, contemplation and thoughtful

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1 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Continuous\\_partial\\_attention](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Continuous_partial_attention)  
2 Ibid

decisions. It also dilutes efforts to focus and concentrate on the present. This constant connectedness also affects real-time relationships and lowers productivity levels, leading to over-stimulation and lack of fulfillment. At this point, I've probably lost several of you during this sermon to your shopping list or plans for the afternoon. We live in a state of continuous partial attention.

The Age of Interruption is apparently not all that new. Even in biblical times, in order to get people's attention, God had to interrupt what they were doing. Granted, people were probably more aware of their surroundings in those days, more attentive to the weather, but also able to think more deeply without being distracted. Today when I'm reading for more than 30 minutes my FitBit reminds me of my hourly goal of achieving a certain number of steps. I recently heard that some people have even attached their watch to the ceiling fan to be free from the notifications and seemingly active messages, so they can focus on something else.

What would it take for God to get your attention? As you skim the surface of incoming data, picking out the relevant details, and moving on, do you ever look for incoming data from the Lord? Jesus says, "Ask and it will be given you, search and you will find." Are you interested enough in what God may have to say to you to put down your smartphone and pray? We seem to be over-stimulated and yet lacking fulfillment. Maybe there is a better way.

Samuel was a young man on a meteoric rise in matters of faith and worship. He had all the fundamentals, and was about to displace Eli as God's representative. Like many others, he started out naïve and innocent. In the story today, he kept hearing someone talking to him as he was sleeping and wrongly assumed it was Eli. Eli finally realized what was going on and instructed him to listen, and next time invite God to speak. Sometimes the Lord is trying to get our attention at the only time we are not distracted, when we are just between sleeping and waking, when our subconscious is most active and undistracted. If you're like me, it's often at night that I stew about things.

Eli was being replaced for cause. His sons were complete jerks, religious phonies who used their position in their father's employ for self-seeking and personal reward. The

Bible calls them “scoundrels .[ with] no regard for the Lord or for the duties of the priests to the people.” Samuel, by contrast, was pure inside and out. His mother, Hannah, had prayed for a child, and when she had Samuel, she was so grateful to the Lord that she gave him to the Temple to be raised as the servant of the Lord. While the back-story is interesting, what interests me today is that all the preparation, the belief that God can and will act, and the obedience demonstrated by Samuel and his mother Hannah, comes down to this exchange; this reversal; this replacement of Eli with Samuel.

The succession of Samuel over Eli illustrates the point that, as others have said, “God chooses the unlikely to accomplish the impossible.” Rarely does God choose based upon the same criteria that we might use. You might be the most unlikely person for some task that the Lord has laid on your heart, and the task may be impossible – but you are in good company. The story of faith is filled with people like you. What is the Lord calling you to today?

Samuel himself will later choose the future king of Israel. But even his confusion is evident when he thinks the son of Jesse, who looks like the star of the football team, must be the one God wants. Soon he discovers that little David, the runt of the litter, is actually the one with the most heart and courage because of his faith. Even Samuel relied too heavily upon the superficial rather than substantive considerations. Surely God led him to Jesse’s family because the tallest and eldest and strongest boy, Eliab, was to become the next leader. The ironic twist is that God chose the one son who wasn’t even there! All seven of the elder brothers were trotted out before the prophet but the one chosen by God was not among them. Little David, the youngest, was still at work shepherding the flock and was about to be anointed by Samuel as the leader of the people.

One cannot judge merely by the outward appearance of things. How many coaches have underestimated their opponents by misjudging the “appearance” of the other players rather than their effectiveness as a team? How many employers have overestimated the capability of an applicant? How many brides and grooms have misjudged their future spouses by too much attention to external qualities and too little attention to inner qualities? One cannot judge merely by the outward appearance.

To avoid the much more difficult and time-consuming process of careful analysis, we all rely upon snap judgments of others and preconceived categories, even prejudices, to size up people. Studies show that we tend to think more highly of physically attractive people than perhaps we should. Knowing that it is human to judge by the outward appearance, especially in the age of television, politicians are careful to portray themselves as vibrant, strong, with a good sense of humor, yet firm and resolute. And their make-up artists make an indelible impression. Politicians are not alone. We tend to size up people superficially based upon their ethnicity, making snap judgments.

We also seem to live in a time when “. . . the Word of the Lord is rare and visions are not widespread.” However, those who cultivate the ability to listen can still hear God speaking. Those who believe it is worth their time and effort to listen for God, can still receive guidance and direction, comfort and strength, correction and renewal, and challenge.

Are you listening? Are you confident in life because of your faith? Are you any more generous? Are you engaged in trying to make a difference? Do you believe that the Lord is still capable of bringing about change in the way things are, for the sake of the way things should be, so that all God's people find life and opportunity?

Martin Luther King, Jr. certainly believed he was on a mission from the Lord — called out and sent out. His father was a preacher. It must have been both gratifying and difficult for the father to watch his son's meteoric rise to national stardom in the Civil Rights movement of the 1950's and 60's. King believed in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, that God still intended to change things and improve the lives of all people regardless of color or race. He believed modernity had made the world smaller and we were now all neighbors, but now we needed to learn to become brothers and sisters with one another. And he believed in the Constitution of the United States when it says, “All . . . are created equal and endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, among them the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” He stood upon these two pillars, the foundational and timeless truths in the Bible, and those codified the U.S. Constitution. He believed, and like Samuel, he listened for a different dream, for God's dream for the future.

Samuel and Martin Luther King, Jr. permitted their dream from God to override the realities they experienced in life, in their nations, and in their communities. There is a chance God will do a new thing! But it requires us, like Hannah and Samuel, and King, to dare to believe in God's vision, resolving ahead of time to become available and obedient to a fresh, demanding, sometimes even dangerous beginning.

Andrew Carnegie once said, "People are developed the same way gold is mined. When gold is mined, several tons of dirt must be moved to get an ounce of gold; but one doesn't go into the mine looking for dirt – one goes in looking for gold." The Lord seems intent upon mining for gold in the human heart. What is to be found in your heart this morning? Have you uncovered the gold or are you still shoveling dirt?

God spoke, and kept speaking several times before he finally got through to Samuel. How many times has the Lord tried to speak with you? How often has the Lord tried to confront something in you, tried to change your mind or direction, offered to comfort and support you, but you were unwilling or unable to tune in. Maybe God is calling you to some new undertaking, to bring faith, hope, and love to someone you know, to stand up for your faith in some situation that is going from bad to worse? Or maybe the Lord is tapping you on the shoulder and inviting you to just slow down, to limit the distractions that occupy you from dawn to dusk, inviting you to listen for a better way of living with greater sense of purpose and more fulfillment.

For centuries Christians have listened for the Lord through daily reading of the Scriptures and prayer. It's remarkable how alive these words really can be. They offer a changed perspective and new insight. And I can appropriate those insights through my prayer life. Ask the Lord to unearth some gold in your life amidst the distractions by setting aside some time to listen for God's invitation to believe in a different vision that the Lord may have for you. It will always include a better world for others too. Make yourself available as Samuel did, and listen with an open heart and a willingness to respond. You might begin simply like Samuel, saying, "Speak Lord, for your servant is listening." God always calls the unqualified to do the impossible. Apart from the Lord we can do nothing, but with the Lord all things are possible. Amen