

*Everyone Can Hear God's Call*

**1 Samuel 3:1-10**

John Breon

The cast of characters in this story includes Eli the priest, Samuel his assistant, and the LORD God. Eli is old. He's still serving as best he can in the temple—really a tabernacle or shrine. His sons are also priests, but they've become corrupt. They take advantage of people, steal from the sacrifices and act in immoral ways.

Samuel, Eli's assistant, is around twelve years old. He's lived in the temple since he was three. His mother Hannah had been unable to have a child. But she prayed to the LORD asking for a child and said that she would dedicate her child to the LORD. She had Samuel. And she kept her promise. She brought him to the temple to live and serve there. And each year when Hannah and her husband come to offer sacrifices in worship, she brought Samuel a little robe she made for him.

The kind of family Samuel came from and his experience growing up in the temple, serving the LORD and helping the priests, prepared him to hear God's voice and to become the leading prophet God wanted him to be.

One night, after he'd gone to sleep, Samuel heard a voice calling him. He was sleeping near the Ark of the Covenant, which was like God's throne in the temple. It represented God's presence. Hearing the voice, he awoke in the light of "the lamp of God" that was burning in the sanctuary. This was the golden lampstand that stood in the Holy Place. Samuel heard the voice and said, "Here I am." Then he ran to Eli, woke him up and said, "Here I am; you called me."

Eli replied, "I didn't call you. Go back to bed."

After Samuel lay down, he heard the voice again calling, "Samuel." So he got up again, went to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me."

Again Eli said, "I didn't call you. Go back and lie down." So he did.

The voice Samuel heard was the LORD calling him. But he didn't know the LORD yet and didn't recognize God's voice. The LORD's word hadn't yet been revealed to him.

A third time the LORD called Samuel and Samuel got up, went to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me."

This time Eli realized that the LORD was calling the boy. So he told Samuel, "Go lie down. If he calls you, say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went back to his place and lay down.

Then the LORD came and stood there, calling again, "Samuel! Samuel!" This time Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening." God then gave Samuel his first prophetic message—a word of judgment on Eli's family.

This chapter concludes this way:

The LORD was with Samuel as he grew up, and he let none of Samuel's words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba recognized that Samuel was attested as a prophet of the LORD. 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. (3:19-4:1a)

Samuel's story begins during the time in Israel that the book of Judges describes as when there was no king and everyone did whatever they wanted (19:1; 21:25). It was a time when God's word was barely heard. Samuel is a leading figure during a time of transition. The word of the LORD will be heard through him. God will use him to identify and anoint a king for the nation—Saul. God will also use Samuel to rebuke Saul for his disobedience and to anoint David as king.

Samuel is an important character in the Old Testament. But he comes from humble beginnings. His mother was mocked and humiliated because she was unable to have children. But the LORD granted her request and gave her Samuel. Then she gave him back to the LORD.

It was in the temple as a young person that Samuel heard the call of God. Anyone is a candidate for God's call. God calls everyone. Those who are ready, who are listening, hear that call and respond. Samuel had to have some help recognizing the call, but then he responded readily.

God's call comes to us all. There's the general call to have faith in God, to love God with all our heart, to obey God and walk in his ways. If you're a Christian, it's because God chose you and called you and you said yes to that call.

God also has a special call for each of us. God calls some of us into ordained ministry. Others God calls to take the gospel across national or cultural borders as missionaries. Others God calls to minister through their job. Parents are called to minister in their families. Every Christian is called to minister, to serve, to speak a word for the LORD. How is God calling you?

The call comes repeatedly. It's like the rotating light on an emergency vehicle. It comes around again and again until we say yes to God's call. Samuel—with Eli's help—finally recognized and responded to God's call the fourth time he heard it.

Jim Buskirk tells about struggling with the call to preach. His father was a pastor, and Jimmy didn't want to be called into ministry by his father. He told a college friend, "I want to preach, but I'm not sure *God* is calling me." The friend said, "Who do you think put the 'want to' in you?"

It's fairly easy to identify with Samuel in this story—especially the younger we are. I've told you my story again recently. I was young, around twelve, when I began responding to God's call to receive Christ and follow him. I was still young when I began to hear and respond to a call to ministry.

It's easy to identify with young Samuel with experiences like those. But what about after we've been doing ministry for a while? What about when we've grown older and more established, even fat and complacent like old Eli? Can we still hear God's call? How do we feel when we see God calling a new generation—and they hear God in different ways than we did or they act differently than we are used to? This isn't just for ordained ministers. How do established churches and church members react to young believers and dynamic new churches? Can God's call bridge the generation gap?

Beloit College in Wisconsin has become famous for their "Mindset List." Each fall, the college publishes a list that shows the outlook of students in the incoming freshman class. If you're over thirty-five and really

want to feel old, take a look at it some time. But it does give a good perspective on the differences in generations. Most of this year's freshman class, the graduating class of 2020, were born in 1998.

Among those who have never been alive in their lifetime are Frank Sinatra, Phil Hartman, Matthew Shepard, Sonny Bono, and Flo-Jo.

Since they arrived on this planet...

There has always been a digital swap meet called eBay.

There have always been Cadillac Escalades, but they just don't seem to be all that into cars.

West Nile has always been a virus found in the U.S.

Vladimir Putin has always been calling the shots at the Kremlin.

The Sandy Hook tragedy is their Columbine.

Cloning has always been a mundane laboratory procedure.

The United States has always been at war.

Euros have always been the coin of the realm...well, at least part of the realm.

Serena Williams has always been winning Grand Slam singles titles.

SpongeBob SquarePants has always lived at Bikini Bottom.

They have never had to watch or listen to programs at a scheduled time [thanks to TiVo and other DVRs].

Each year they've been alive the U.S. population has grown by more than one million Latinos.

Vaccines have always been erroneously linked to autism.

If you want to reach them, you'd better send a text—emails are oft ignored.

They disagree with their parents as to which was the "first" Star Wars episode.

Bluetooth has always been keeping us wireless and synchronized.

X-rays have always been digital allowing them to be read immediately.

While chads were hanging in Florida, they were potty training in all 50 states.

John Elway and Wayne Gretzky have always been retired.  
Airline tickets have always been purchased online.  
Robots have always been surgical partners in the O.R.  
Michael J. Fox has always spoken publicly about having Parkinson's disease.

As the “Millennial” generation continues to move into the workforce, older generations try to understand them—or not. Younger generations tend to feel like older folks don’t understand them. Older generations tend to feel like younger folks don’t appreciate what they’ve worked for and established. What if God calls us to serve people of generations other than ours?

Each general age group or generation has a unique experience of the world and culture. They respond differently and act differently. Of course, there’s overlap and generations learn from each other. But there are real differences. Imagine if you had been born ten years earlier or later than you were. You’d be a different person because you would have been “set down in a quite other world, amid quite other thoughts and hopes and ways” (A. J. Gossip, citing Emerson in “The Clash of Age and Youth,” *20 Centuries of Great Preaching* 8:241-42).

I came across a sermon published in 1928 by a Scottish preacher named A. J. Gossip. He describes the gap between generations:

...age with its memories, its wistfulness, its regrets; youth with its valiant dissatisfactions, its hot enthusiasms, its confident hopes—the one standing with a shading hand up to its brow, gazing back lingeringly over dear familiar scenes from which it parts reluctantly; the other all impatience to be up and gone, looking out eagerly towards the day, and “with morning in its eyes.” (Gossip 240)

Then he mentions a Scripture that describes David: “When he had served his day and generation he fell asleep” (that is, he died). That’s maybe the most that most of us can do. Old Eli did that—maybe not very well. Worship wasn’t all God meant it to be under Eli’s ministry. His son’s didn’t

honor God's law, but corrupted their ministry. But before we judge Eli too harshly, we need to remember that later Samuel's sons didn't share his faith and integrity. They too became corrupt.

Eli probably felt that God was passing him by when he saw that Samuel was receiving the word of the LORD. And God *was* removing Eli's family from the priesthood and that role of leadership. But Eli had been there when Hannah was praying for a son and he spoke a blessing to her that came to pass. Samuel needed Eli to help him understand who was calling him. The light of God had not completely gone out during Eli's ministry.

Young believers and churches need the tradition, the roots of older believers and churches. And, those of us in older more established churches, or who've been believers for many years, need the vitality, the vividness, the unruliness of newer churches and younger believers.

We really can learn from each other and help each other. God's call really does come to everyone—young, old, or in between. You can hear the call of God. You can respond and follow. You can serve faithfully in your day and generation. All of us together can serve in the power of God's Holy Spirit.

For all of us, the Cross defines our call. The life of following Jesus and the ways we live it in our homes and families, schools and jobs and churches, is shaped by the cross of Jesus. I love this quotation I first saw in college:

I simply argue that the cross be raised again at the center of the market place as well as on the steeple of the church. I am recovering the claim that Jesus was not crucified in a cathedral between two candles, but on a cross between two thieves; on the town garbage heap; at a crossroad so cosmopolitan that they had to write his title in Hebrew and in Latin and in Greek ... at the kind of place where cynics talk smut, and thieves curse, and soldiers gamble. Because that is where he died. And that is what he died about. And that is where [his followers] should be and what [they] should be about. (George MacLeod, in Paul Stevens, *The Other Six Days* 163)

A. J. Gossip concluded his sermon on age and youth by describing a scene that comes several centuries after Eli and Samuel's time:

There was once a day of crisis in Jerusalem. For Uzziah [the king], the father of his people, the great statesman on whose wisdom they had leaned, was dead. ...And every one felt lost. That day a youngish man, bewildered like the rest, went to the Temple to beg God to raise up someone on whom they could lean. "And why not you?" said God, in sudden and most unexpected answer. And the man gazed astounded, hardly crediting his own heart; yet, finding it was said in earnest, rose up to his feet, dazed and stunned but obedient, "Here I am, send me." And today God is saying, Why not you? And you? And you? Christ needs you, Christ appeals to you, Christ follows you, entreating you for your help. God made you for the work of your own generation. Don't throw away your chance! (248)

God had called Eli. God called Samuel. Later God would call David and still later Isaiah and many others. God is calling today. Can we say, "Here I am. Speak, LORD, your servants are listening"?