The Prophet Is Called

Devotional Reading: 1 Thessalonians 5:11–22
Background Scripture: 1 Samuel 1:1–28; 3:1–4:1a

1 Samuel 3:8–20

8 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. 9 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.

10 The LORD came and stood there, calling as at the other times, "Samuel! Samuel!"

Then Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

11 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. 12 At that time I will carry out against Eli everything I spoke against his family—from beginning to end. 13 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. 14 Therefore I swore to the house of Eli, 'The guilt of Eli's house will never be atoned for by sacrifice or offering.' "

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

Samuel answered, "Here I am."

17 "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." 18 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."

19 The LORD was with Samuel as he grew up, and he let none of Samuel's words fall to the ground. 20 And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba recognized that Samuel was attested as a prophet of the LORD.

Key Text

Eli told Samuel, "Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.' "
—1 Samuel 3:9a

Generations:

From Canaan to Jerusalem

Unit 3: From Judges to Kings

Lessons 9–13

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Describe the historical background of Samuel's prophetic ministry.
2. Compare God's call of Samuel to the call of later prophets (such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, etc.).
3. Identify ways to make truth-telling speech a part of everyday life.

Lesson Outline

Introduction
- A. Sunday Prayers
- B. Lesson Context: Historical
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I. God Calls (1 Samuel 3:8–14)
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  - *Wise Mentors*
- B. Eli Instructs (v. 9)
- C. Samuel Responds (v. 10)
- D. The Lord Reveals (vv. 11–14)

II. Prophet Speaks (1 Samuel 3:15–20)
- A. Samuel's Fear (vv. 15–16)
- B. Eli's Question (vv. 17–18)
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  - *With Us*

Conclusion
- A. The Courage to Serve
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. Sunday Prayers

When I began leading worship at our church, I was both honored and nervous. The biggest hurdle was my apprehension associated with leading congregational prayer. As a part of our regular services, attendees may respond to the sermon or share prayer requests from an open mic. Congregants often voice praise, thanksgiving, or petitions regarding difficult times and situations. Concerns range from the very personal to the global. The worship leader's job is to conclude this collaborative time by responding to the requests, acknowledging what was shared, and praying over the concerns.

The pressure I felt was deeply uncomfortable. The first time, my hands shook. My mind raced with thoughts like, *What if I say the wrong thing? What if I forget someone's name?* I wondered whether taking this position was a terrible mistake; I considered praying for the fire alarm to go off! However, I knew God had called me to this place and opportunity. I knew he'd asked me to serve.

The fire alarm did not go off, and I got through that first service. It wasn't perfect, and I've made some mistakes. But God is always with me. I'm grateful for the courage to follow him obediently and trust his call on my life.

B. Lesson Context: Historical

Prophets filled one of the three essential roles in ancient Israel, the other two being priest and king. Prophets had close relationships with the Lord and received his words directly. Therefore, they spoke in the name of God, proclaiming and interpreting God's words to whomever he directed. Usually, this was to the people of Israel; at other times, it was to ungodly nations. Prophets were often attached to places of worship or royal courts. They spoke truth to power, challenging authorities on ethical grounds when they neglected God's justice or mercy. The Bible shares the stories of many prophets. A short list includes Moses, Miriam, Deborah, Elijah, Elisha, Jonah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. Some

served only in prophetic ministry; others had political, military, or leadership roles alongside their prophetic responsibilities. Samuel was one of the latter, being acknowledged today as the last judge of the era of the judges and the first prophet of the era that followed. The time frame of his ministry was about 1067–1043 BC.

C. Lesson Context: Literary

Today's lesson picks up partway through what scholars call Samuel's "prophetic call narrative" (compare Exodus 3–4; Isaiah 6; Jeremiah 1; Ezekiel 1). The chapter begins by noting that it was uncommon for the people of Israel to hear from God directly or to see him (1 Samuel 3:1). God was not absent from the Israelites, but it may have felt like it. A later prophet will describe such times as a "famine" (Amos 8:11–12).

Samuel was being raised in the tabernacle, the tent structure that housed the ark of the covenant at Shiloh, because his mother had promised him to God. Samuel's mother, Hannah, could not conceive and prayed for God to grant her a child (1 Samuel 1:10). She vowed to dedicate him to God's service if God answered her prayer (1:11).

Eventually, young Samuel was old enough to minister "before the Lord under Eli the priest" (1 Samuel 2:11), although he was still a "boy" in that capacity (2:18; 3:1). One night, while Samuel was asleep in the tabernacle, he heard a voice calling his name (3:3–4). Assuming it to be Eli, Samuel hurried over to his elderly mentor's bed to see what he needed (3:5). Eli sent Samuel back to sleep. A little while later, Samuel heard his name called a second time and rushed over to Eli—and again Eli sent him back to bed (3:6). Today's text begins with the third calling of Samuel's name.

I. God Calls

(1 Samuel 3:8–14)

A. Eli Perceives (v. 8)

8. 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.

Repetition indicates importance—one is to pay attention. For *a third time* this night, *Samuel* rises from a place close to the ark of the covenant (1 Samuel 3:3). He navigates through the tabernacle to Eli's "usual" sleeping quarters (3:2). After this third disruption to his sleep, *Eli* finally discerns who is calling Samuel. Imagine Samuel's bewilderment, waking up repeatedly because an unknown person calls his name!

Samuel is still a child. The Hebrew word here (translated *boy*) refers to a preadolescent. Samuel's experience of God is limited to what Eli has taught him. Although he serves in the tabernacle, Samuel does not yet have a personal relationship with God (1 Samuel 3:7).

What Do You Think?

What is the role of repetition in growth and learning?

Digging Deeper

How has God utilized repetition in the development of your spiritual life?

Wise Mentors

I approached a mentor of mine once when I was distressed. I wanted guidance about a particular choice. I had spent a lot of time in prayer, but sensed no answer. Actually, I perceived a pointed silence on the part of the Lord.

My mentor prayed with me and then was silent for a while herself. When she spoke, she said she thought the Lord wanted me to decide. She reminded me that sometimes there is no right or wrong decision. In those times, God wants us to grow beyond our chronic distrust of our knowledge, wisdom, and motivations. My mentor counseled me to make the choice myself without fear.

In this case, my mentor helped me recognize the Lord's silence. In Samuel's case, his mentor helped him recognize the Lord's voice. How long would Samuel have run back and forth, looking for who was speaking to him, without Eli's wise counsel? Do you have a mentor who can help you seek a deeper understanding of God's words and his silences? Can you be or become such a mentor?

—DS-G

B. Eli Instructs (v. 9)

9. 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.

Eli, an experienced priest, instructs Samuel to return to bed. He coaches Samuel through his response to God's presence. Samuel returns to an inner area of the tabernacle. It may be where Samuel regularly slept, but it is also possible that Samuel was practicing "incubation." Incubation involves spending the night in a temple or holy space in hopes of experiencing a divine dream or vision. Many ancient Near Eastern cultures practiced it—Egyptians, Hittites, Canaanites, and Israelites—but Samuel's lack of understanding when the Lord calls him indicates an unexpected experience. The name *Samuel* means "God hears" or "God asks" (1 Samuel 1:20); we see the latter happening here.

What Do You Think?

What is the purpose of wise mentorship in spiritual development?

Digging Deeper

How has mentorship shaped your life as a believer?

C. Samuel Responds (v. 10)

10a. The LORD came and stood there, calling as at the other times, "Samuel! Samuel!"

The fourth call from *the Lord* comes with a visitation. Previously, God had only called out to Samuel. This time, two additional verbs describe the Lord's presence with Samuel as a manifestation (*came* and *stood there*). We use the term *manifestation* because no one can see God's face and live (Exodus 33:20). A more scholarly term for this type of event is a *theophany.*

The way Samuel hears God's voice invites us to consider how other prophets heard his voice in similar and dissimilar ways. For additional study, see Isaiah 6; Jeremiah 1; Ezekiel 2; Hosea 1; etc.

God speaks Samuel's name twice in succession. The repetition echoes God's call to Abraham (Genesis 22:11), Jacob (46:2), and Moses (Exodus 3:4).

10b. Then Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

This moment changes Samuel's life forever. It is one thing for God to call someone, but the call remains incomplete until the person answers. Samuel's words echo Eli's advice. He asks the Lord to *speak* and acknowledges himself as God's *servant.* He lets God know that he is poised to listen. This may be the reason the Lord initiates his communication at night. The distractions of the day are past, and the Lord has Samuel's full attention.

What Do You Think?

What circumstances and environment best assist you in giving God your full attention?

Digging Deeper

What distractions may God be asking you to set aside or avoid?

D. The Lord Reveals (vv. 11–14)

11. 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.

This verse begins a section that some scholars call "Samuel's dream." Samuel's encounter with *the Lord* doesn't seem to be in a dream, like Solomon's encounter, which comes centuries later (1 Kings 3:5). Samuel is awake while receiving this message! In the ancient Near East, however, sleep was not required for an encounter to be classified as occurring in a dream. It counted as a dream if it happened at night when the recipient would usually be asleep (compare Job 33:14–18).

In any case, God begins to reveal his plan to Samuel. He starts with a call to pay attention—the Hebrew word translated as *see* indicates that what comes next is essential. In modern English, we might say, "Listen up!"

Tingling *ears* symbolize hearing the terrible news of God's anger. The description is powerful and occurs only in two other places in the Old Testament: when God speaks of bringing disaster upon Judah and Jerusalem and when God prophesies that the Valley of Ben Hinnom will be

renamed the Valley of Slaughter (2 Kings 21:12; Jeremiah 19:3). The details of this verse's particular bad news come next.

12. "At that time I will carry out against Eli everything I spoke against his family—from beginning to end.

God knows what has happened regarding Eli's wicked sons (1 Samuel 2:12–17). Eli also knows, and his weak attempt to correct his sons' behavior has been ineffectual (2:22–25). Since Eli won't stop their sin, God will do so himself. This message is not God's first communication to Eli on the subject (2:27–36).

The phrasing of *beginning to end* indicates totality—God's corrective action will be comprehensive.

13. "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.

God will *judge* against both "sins of commission" (actively committing sin) and "sins of omission" (failing to do something that one should do). Eli's two *sons* are guilty of the former; Eli himself is guilty of the latter. The sons were guilty of thievery that amounted to contempt (1 Samuel 2:12–17). Their sins also included adultery and dishonoring their father (2:22, 25). These corrupt priests did not operate in secret; ordinary Israelites knew about their mishandling of offerings (2:24).

Eli bears responsibility—and God is holding him to it. Eli heard about his sons' behavior, and while he did protest, his sons did not listen (1 Samuel 2:22–25). Eli did nothing more to stop them. As the head of the household, Eli was obligated to discipline his sons.

What Do You Think?

Are sins of commission or sins of omission more prevalent for modern believers?

Digging Deeper

Which are more dangerous? Do you struggle with one or the other?

14. "Therefore I swore to the house of Eli, 'The guilt of Eli's house will never be atoned for by sacrifice or offering.' "

God has decided to act, and his decision is final. No *sacrifice* or *offering* will cause him to change his mind. What was and is prophesied will indeed come to pass (1 Samuel 4:12–18).

II. Prophet Speaks

(1 Samuel 3:15–20)

A. Samuel's Fear (vv. 15–16)

15. Samuel lay down until morning and then opened the doors of the house of the LORD. He was afraid to tell Eli the vision,

After receiving the message from the Lord, *Samuel* does not immediately go to Eli—he stays in bed *until morning*. When dawn arrives, he performs his regular duty of opening *the doors of the house of the Lord* to begin a new workday.

The message God gave Samuel is not easy to digest. As Samuel goes about his daily routines, he feels fear when he thinks about recounting it to *Eli*. We can easily imagine this because of Samuel's closeness with the elderly priest.

What Do You Think?

Is fear a legitimate emotion in a life dedicated to God's service?

Digging Deeper

How do 1 Samuel 21:10–15; Psalm 27:1–3; and 2 Timothy 1:7 impact your answer?

16. but Eli called him and said, "Samuel, my son." Samuel answered, "Here I am."

We wonder whether Eli experienced any insomnia after he sent Samuel back to receive the Lord's message! *Eli* waits out the night and then summons *Samuel*, identifying him as *my son*. He may be putting some pressure on Samuel by reminding him of the nature of their relationship. Samuel answers promptly, with the same response he had throughout the night: *Here I am* (1 Samuel 3:5–6, 8).

B. Eli's Question (vv. 17–18)

17. "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."

Eli couches his demand to know what Samuel heard in the language of a threat. Dire repercussions will ensue if Samuel doesn't tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Given the content of the revelation, we may easily imagine Samuel's reluctance to tell Eli plainly. Samuel thus faces a test of his integrity. Will he relay the fullness of God's words to Eli?

18a. So Samuel told him everything, hiding nothing from him.

Young Samuel performs a challenging aspect of prophecy: faithfully passing along what God has said. It is an unpleasant message, yet Samuel holds nothing back, passing his integrity test (compare Revelation 22:18–19). Samuel accepts the Lord's calling as he steps into his role as a prophet for Israel, whether he realizes it or not.

18b. Then Eli said, "He is the LORD; let him do what is good in his eyes."

To his credit, Eli receives the Lord's message and does not blame Samuel. Today we might say that Eli does not "shoot the messenger."

One way to understand the concept of Old Testament prophecy is to compare it to a child telling their sibling, "Dad says to get inside right now!" The child speaks the words, but the authority comes from the parent. Eli recognizes God's authority over Samuel's message and accepts God's word. He submits to the Lord's determination of what is *good*. In this context, good represents that which is right, reasonable, and commendable.



Visual for Lesson 9. *Point to the visual and ask, "How will you make space to listen for God's promptings this week?"*

C. God's Blessing (vv. 19–20)

19. The LORD was with Samuel as he grew up, and he let none of Samuel's words fall to the ground.

As Samuel grows up, he conveys God's will for the people of Israel. Samuel's growth speaks of maturing not only physically but also spiritually. He will be the first of the prophets to foresee the outpouring of the time of the Messiah (see Acts 3:24).

After the initial call, God does not leave Samuel alone but remains *with* him, giving direction and faithful support. Samuel's encounter with God is not a one-and-done situation but the beginning of a lifetime spent on God's mission.

The phrase *let none of Samuel's words fall to the ground* is unique. It only appears in precisely this way here. The Hebrew phrase seems to mean that people listened to Samuel, and God fulfilled the things he spoke through Samuel, marking him as a faithful prophet. Daniel 8:12 speaks of a time and situation when the truth is "cast . . . to the ground." The opposite is the case here.

With Us

On this side of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, we have the privilege of a personal relationship with God. The Spirit of God lives in us (Romans 8:9)! God promises to draw near to those who draw near to him (James 4:8). Yet, it can be difficult to feel connected to the Lord, especially when transitions happen.

I used to meet with God in the cool stillness of early morning, before the world was quite awake. There was habit, trust, and comfort in our routine. But when I became a mother, exhaustion obliterated that space. Suddenly, I was no longer a morning person, and I struggled to connect with God during other times of the day.

Graciously, God brought something new. My children could not sleep unless they were in motion, so I started going on hours-long walks. I found that walking in the fresh air, with the peace of my children's contentment nearby, was

another blessed stillness where I could hear God. Where do you go or what do you do to know God is with you? —DS-G

20. And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba recognized that Samuel was attested as a prophet of the LORD.

The phrase *from Dan to Beersheba* is another way of saying "from border to border." The towns of Dan and Beersheba denote the northernmost and southernmost cities in Israel, respectively (compare Judges 20:1; 2 Samuel 3:10; 17:11; 24:2, 15; 1 Kings 4:25). Thus, the phrase points to the totality of Israel in acknowledging Samuel *as a prophet of the Lord.*

The Hebrew word translated *attested* indicates that the Israelites confirm Samuel's ministry as being from God. The idea is that of "being verified" (compare Genesis 42:20). There is proof that Samuel hears from God (contrast Deuteronomy 18:22; Jeremiah 14:14).

As Samuel steps into God's larger purpose for his life, a new period in Israel's history dawns. Samuel will be the last of the judges, bringing that era to a close (1 Samuel 7:15; see Acts 13:20). He becomes the first of the prophets to foretell the days of the Messiah (Acts 3:24). The people will have a new kind of leader—a pivotal one.

Conclusion

A. The Courage to Serve

In the Old Testament, prophets were called to proclaim God's word. Young as he was, Samuel proved himself to be a faithful prophet, receiving the word of the Lord and declaring all of it despite the difficulty of the message. Perhaps his mother's determination to fulfill her vow to God weighed into his understanding and actions (1 Samuel 1:11, 24–28).

Many other Old Testament prophets also faced the challenge of giving hard messages. Jeremiah, for example, spoke God's words to the prophet's personal detriment (Jeremiah 37:1–38:9). However, the honor and respect each prophet gave God in faithfully serving and obediently speaking is worthy of emulation.

The human perspective is skewed when it comes to the consequences of sin. God's justice requires righteousness, which results in negative consequences for those who refuse to obey him. Sometimes, what God deems "good" feels ugly, harsh, or disappointing. The prophet's role was often to foretell unpleasant outcomes when people refused to heed warnings. This ministry was difficult—it required great fear of the Lord, a desire to serve him alone, and a substantial love for the people to whom the message pertained. Their call was vitally related to the commandments on which Jesus would say that "all the law and the prophets" hang: (1) "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" and (2) "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:37–40). Still today, there is substantial love in a willingness to obey God by proclaiming hard-to-accept truth.

B. Prayer

Father God, thank you for prompting Samuel's faithful response to your call. Like Samuel, may we have the courage to serve you obediently, even when—or especially when—it is difficult. May we hear and know your truth. May we faithfully speak when we sense your Spirit is prompting. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Serve the Lord faithfully—even when (or especially when) it is difficult.

How to Say It

Beersheba	Beer-*she*-buh
Canaanites	*Kay*-nu-***nites***
Deuteronomy	Due-ter-*ahn*-uh-me
Ezekiel	Ee-*zeek*-ee-ul or Ee-*zeek*-yul
Hinnom	*Hin*-um
Hittites	*Hit*-ites or *Hit*-tites
Isaiah	Eye-*zay*-uh
Israelites	*Iz*-ray-el-ites
Jeremiah	Jair-uh-*my*-uh
Samuel	*Sam*-you-el
theophany	the-*ah*-fuh-nee

Involvement Learning

Enhance your lesson with NIV Bible Student *(from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at www.standardlesson.com or in the back of the* NIV Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition*).*

Into the Lesson

Begin the lesson by asking participants to silently reflect on a time they felt a strong inner prompting, a sense of direction, or a feeling that something was being communicated to them.

Talk about how that feeling could be a "calling." As a class, discuss the following: What does it mean to you to "be called" by God?

Say: "Today's Bible study tells the story of how young Samuel was called by God. Pay attention to how Samuel learns to recognize God's voice and how his mentor Eli helps him."

Into the Word

Option. Distribute copies of the "A Deep Dive into History" exercise from the activity page, which you can download. Divide learners into four small groups to complete as indicated.

Ask a volunteer to read 1 Samuel 3:8–10. Then discuss: 1–Why do you think it took Samuel three times to realize God was calling him? 2–What does Samuel's eventual response signify? 3–What does his answer reveal about his attitude? 4–Why was Eli finally able to discern that it was the Lord?

Divide the class into three groups: **Isaiah Group**, **Jeremiah Group**, and **Ezekiel Group**. Distribute handouts (you create) of the questions below for in-group discussion.

Isaiah Group. Read Isaiah 6. 1–How does God call Isaiah? 2–What is the same or different between Isaiah's call and Samuel's call?

Jeremiah Group. Read Jeremiah 1:4–10. 1–Describe God's call to Jeremiah. 2–What is the same or different between Jeremiah's call and Samuel's call?

Ezekiel Group. Read Ezekiel 2. 1–How does God call Ezekiel? 2–What is the same or different between Ezekiel's call and Samuel's call?

Call groups together to share their discoveries.

Option. Distribute copies of the "Word Study" activity from the activity page. Have each group complete one section as indicated before discussing conclusions as a large group.

Invite another volunteer to read 1 Samuel 3:11–16. Talk through the following: 1–What does God's message to Samuel reveal about the nature of divine judgment? 2–How does the message conveyed in these verses reflect the state of Eli's household? 3–What does God's pronouncement against Eli and his sons tell us about the consequences of neglecting one's responsibilities? Discuss how God's message would have been difficult for Samuel to hear—and even harder to deliver. Invite learners to shout out the emotions Samuel might have been experiencing when he heard God's message. Write them on the board. Talk about the ethical dilemma Samuel faced: obedience to God versus the potential for conflict or rejection.

Invite a volunteer to read 1 Samuel 3:17–20. Continue the discussion with the following: 1–Why do you think Samuel told Eli everything God had revealed? 2–What does this demonstrate about Samuel's willingness to serve God? 3–How does Eli's response to Samuel's revelation demonstrate his acceptance of God's will? 4–How important is it to be faithful to the message that God has given you, even when it is difficult?

Into Life

Talk about how Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Samuel all had to have courage to serve God and speak uncomfortable truths. Emphasize that despite their difficulties, they served the Lord faithfully.

Lead a brief brainstorming session about why it might be difficult to tell the truth in our everyday lives. Write the class's responses alongside the emotions list you made earlier in the lesson.

Using Samuel as an example, lead a second brainstorming session on ways to make truth-telling a part of our everyday lives. Challenge learners to adopt one of the ideas on the board to use throughout the week. Conclude with prayer.