



# One Page Sermon

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#### 1 Samuel 3:1-21 The LORD calls Samuel in the night

You learn a lot about Samuel from where it is placed in our Biblical canon. In between the books of Judges and Kings, Samuel functions as the bridge between these two important eras of Israel's history. For centuries, the Israelites operated in the Promised Land as a loose confederation. They came together under the leadership of a Judge when there was outside pressure or too much internal strife.

The book of Judges includes stories of conquest and victory in battle. The stars of Judges are Gideon, Samson, and Deborah. After Samuel comes the Book of Kings (both Samuel and Kings were originally one book. They are listed in our Bibles as two books because they were too long to fit on a scroll. When they began to be printed in books, publishers held onto the tradition of separating them into two. Hence there is 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, and 1 and 2 Chronicles).

The Book of Kings is just that—the story of the Kings of Israel and Judah. In between is Samuel, which tells the story of how the united kingdom of Israel began with the rise and fall of first Saul and then David. Before there could be Saul and David, we have the call of Samuel, the prophet who chose them both.

The Book of Samuel begins in a period of turmoil. Eli is the High Priest, but this chapter sets the scene. “The Lord’s word was rare at that time, and visions weren’t widely known.” Eli’s vision was failing, both literally and figuratively. Eli’s sons abuse their power and Eli has done little about it. Meanwhile, Eli’s mentor Samuel is about to have a strange night.

In this story Samuel is a young man. His age is ambiguous, but most consider him to be around the age of 12 in this story. He hears God’s voice, but is unable to recognize it. Believing that it is his mentor who is calling him, he goes to Eli three times. On the third time, Eli realizes what is going on. He tells Samuel what to do and Samuel gets most unwelcome news.

God tells Samuel that Eli’s time as High Priest is all but over. His sons will not follow in the line of priests as Eli had once hoped. God was no longer speaking to Eli, but instead would speak to Samuel. Eli—much to his credit—receives the news of his rebuke with resignation and acceptance. There will finally be accountability in the House of Eli. The story concludes with us finding out that Samuel is now a prophet, and in time all of Israel would accept this fact.

There is much to learn from this story of Samuel’s encounter with God in the night. First, Eli is held accountable. His failure is great, and there are repercussions. God is God of grace, but there is also accountability. Grace does not mean there are no consequences. Eli will no longer hear the voice of God. He can however, recognize it when someone else hears.



Samuel and Eli. Christ Church Cathedral in Oxford. Creative Commons License <https://www.flickr.com/photos/paullew/6677946117>

In the end, if it were not for Eli’s guidance, Samuel may have never figured out what was going on. Samuel needed Eli to guide him, show him what it meant to hear God’s voice, and model to him how to respond. Eli had once known God well, and although he lost his vision, he was still needed.

The energy and exuberance of Samuel is needed, but so is the wisdom of Eli. Neither is perfect (Samuel will grow to make some of the same mistakes as Eli), but the Church would do well to learn from this inter-generational pair.

I used to identify with the youth of Samuel. I have thought of myself as the young man being called in the night. Yet now I realize that I have also been Eli, blind to the ways that power is abused and sins have been ignored. We, like Eli, have been negligent to the sins of human-caused climate change, institutional racism, LGBTQ exclusion, and unchecked consumerism. We, like Eli, are being held accountable through more severe weather, erosion of trust, domestic instability and polarization.

Still, if the Word of God is to be heard again, both Samuel and Eli are needed. And maybe we are all both Samuel *and* Eli—responsible and accountable for past errors, but still called by God to take action and speak words that will make our ears tingle.