

1 Samuel 3:1-21: The Call of God

This morning we are looking at the call of Samuel. To some extent this is the second part of a section that began back in **2:12**. If you remember there's a contrast between Eli's wicked sons and young Samuel who is faithfully serving God at the Tabernacle. It goes back and forth, back and forth. Then at the end of chapter 2 there is a final judgment on Eli and his sons given by an unknown prophet. Chapter 3 is the call of Samuel and ends with him also giving God's final judgment on Eli and his sons. It's a fascinating portion of Scripture.

One thing I want to point out in this passage is that the call of Samuel into ministry is very unique. It's along the lines of God appearing out of nowhere to Abraham or Jesus simply showing up at the beach one day to call 4 of his disciples. It would seem almost random if we didn't know any better about the sovereignty of God.

Now, before we even get into the passage, I want to take a few minutes to talk about how we address a section like this. How do we even approach this? Because people do some weird things with the OT sometimes. They also do some weird things with the NT, but specifically the OT gets rather abused and it often happens with passages like this where there's a unique situation or calling in someone's life. They'll try to take a passage like this and say this is what happened to them or twist in all sorts of weird ways.

So how do we think through these kind of passages? How do we apply them?

When we are reading through the Bible - especially in longer narrative sections - there's something we have to ask ourselves often: Is this how God always works? Is this what God always expects of his people? Or is this something unique and special to this situation? Is this a one-off, a unique event that the Bible simply records? Bible teachers call this the difference between narrative and normative situations.

A narrative situation simply tells us **that** something happened. God did work in this way, but it's not necessarily normal or usual or something we should always expect. God reveled himself to Moses in a burning bush; God brought 10 plagues against Egypt; God carried Elijah to heaven in a chariot surrounded by fire. Those are narrative situations where the Bible simply tells us what happened without giving us any expectation that it will happen again. If you've talked to God in a burning bush, then Andy and I might need to come talk with you.

A normative situation in the Bible is something that's recorded that we can expect to be the normal way God works or the normal way we should act. Hence the word "normative." Believers become new creations, we serve other believers, go from hopeless to filled with a living hope, we don't fear death like we once did.

When we get those two things confused at best things get weird, at worst things get heretical. For an example of weirdness, I've had people tell me they've "put out a fleece for God." Who are they referring to? Gideon. Remember he wanted to know if God was with him so he put out a fleece and made a deal with God. So God made the fleece wet and the ground dry. Gideon wasn't sure if that was really God, so he told God to reverse it. The next morning the fleece was dry and the ground was wet. That confirmed to Gideon God was with him to deliver Israel. Here's the problem with that: we never see any expectation that we are to do that or anything like that. We don't put God to the test. Gideon actually did that stunt because he doubted God - his faith was weak. He wasn't seeking God's will, God had already told him what to do. Gideon was waffling. Gideon's situation is not normative; this is not what we should be doing. This is narrative, a unique situation where God does happen to show grace.

Side: This is an especially difficult in the books of Acts because Acts is a transitional time between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant. Sometimes the Holy Spirit comes on people while they are listening to the gospel preached. Sometimes he doesn't come until apostles come later and lay hands on people. Sometimes when the Spirit comes everyone speaks in tongues - pentecostals like those verses. But they don't always speak in tongues - cessationists like those verses. We have to be careful because Acts is a transition time. Some of it is narrative, some of it is normative.

How do we know which is which? We don't have time right now to lay down principles for deciding. But to some extent I think most of us have a feel for which are which. But what do we do with a passage where God acts very uniquely in a narrative situation? What do we do?

What we do in those cases is zoom out just a little bit and see if there are some principles we can grab from the situation. Or see if there are parallels to what God is doing in this particular instance to how he works in other instances. God always acts according to his character, even if sometimes he acts in unique ways. We also know that all of Scripture is driving toward the atoning sacrifice of Jesus or it looks back on Jesus so we can see how this one story fits into that greater picture.

The application here with Samuel is not that we should be sleeping at the church, or waiting for God to audibly call to us, physically come visit us, or use this as a justification for denouncing every ministry we don't like. I know most of you know this, but many people completely miss this.

What do we see here? We see the young man Samuel - probably a teenager by this point - who doesn't know the Lord personally although he knows about him. And God comes to him and sovereignly calls him into his Kingdom and then puts him into ministry.

That's the bigger picture.

Once we step back and see that, then although the details may be different and unique, Samuel's story isn't that much different than ours. It's still God working, still God calling, still God putting his people into service for his glory. The details are different, but the basic format of God saving his people putting them into service is the same.

So that's what I want to look at from God calling Samuel this morning. What can we learn about God's call to salvation and what can we learn about his Word in this section.

1) The Word of the Lord is Essential in God's call. **Read 1**

The first thing I want to point out is how crucial God's Word is in him calling people. We can use the word call in a few different ways. It could be a general call that we make to salvation. It could be specifically God's work in saving someone - called the effective/effectual call. Or it could be the call of God in someone's life into ministry.

Here, whatever else we can say, God had given Israel the silent treatment for some time. He had not directly communicated with his people.

What makes this section so interesting is that it's not just Samuel being called into ministry. This is Samuel being called into a relationship with Yahweh. This is God's saving/effectual call on Samuel's life as well. And what we see throughout this section is that God's Word is vital in the work of salvation and it is vital in ministry. Where the Word of God does not exist believers don't exist. And where believers don't proclaim the Word of God there is no true ministry going on.

Vs. 1 says Samuel has been ministering before the Lord. That phrase, in the context of the Tabernacle means that Samuel was involved in the sacrificial process. He was doing the work of a priest, sacrificing and praying for the people. He was the bright spot in Israel when Israel had reached peak corruption.

And it was probably because corruption and sin among God's people was so rampant that God had stopped communicating with his people. The Word of the Lord was rare; there was no frequent vision. Often in the OT when God doesn't speak to his people it is a result of rampant sinfulness. In some sense God has already spoke to people - he has given them his Word - but if they don't obey what they already have, God's not going to give them any more.

And just to be clear, these weren't people who in the goodness of their heart just didn't know anything about God. These were not ignorant people. These were people who knew that the Lord had delivered them out of Egypt, given them the Promised Land, knew that they should be worshipping God in purity and had rejected him. This was not innocent or ignorant. This was wholesale apostasy.

And as a result God withheld the one thing they needed: his Word. **Read 1**

Here's what we know about God's Word. It is essential for people to be saved. No one can be saved apart from the Word of God, apart from the message of the Word of God. We don't need God to speak audibly or in visions. That'd be nice, but just like then we need to be faithful to proclaim the Word we have.

The other thing we should mention is that for any call to ministry to be genuine it will be a call to bring people the Word of God. I don't want to burst any bubbles but if someone feels called to ministry, but that ministry has nothing to do with the Word of God - it's not ministry. When God calls a person to ministry, he is calling them specifically to proclaim or aid in proclaiming his Word.

2) It Is God Who is Ultimately Responsible to Call a Person. Read 2-10

So this is Samuel's salvation story, as it were. At least that's what we'd call it from a NT perspective. The OT doesn't use the phrase salvation like the NT uses salvation. It uses phrases like "knew the Lord" or "walked with the Lord" or "did what was right in the eyes of the Lord." Those are the terms the OT typically uses.

So here's young Samuel, he's sleeping in the Tabernacle. If you remember the Tabernacle was a big courtyard area that had a massive tent in the middle of it. Sometimes that tent was called the temple, as in **Vs. 3**, but it was the Tabernacle.

In any case, the tent was divided into 2 parts. The first part was the Holy Place where there was Menorah (the u-shaped lamp stand), the table of showbread, and the small altar of incense. The second inner room was called the Holy of Holies where the Ark - the wooden table with the 2 tablets of stone in it - was kept. It seems like Samuel was actually sleeping in that tent where the Ark and everything else was kept.

Why was he sleeping in there? The priests were supposed to make sure the lamp burned all night long. But there was a problem with Eli. What was his problem? He was blind and couldn't tell if it went out. So here's Samuel who's doing Eli's job for him. Young Samuel is the faithful and vigilant one. Eli is the blind one - in more ways than one.

And Samuel is serving the Lord before he even knows the Lord personally. That's what **Vs. 7** is pointing out - Samuel didn't know the Lord. We would say Samuel wasn't saved yet because the Lord had not revealed himself to him. **Read 7**

So although Samuel was in the Tabernacle ministering, working for the Lord, and knew about Yahweh, he didn't know the Lord in a personal way. God had not revealed himself to him. But this is Samuel's salvation story, if you will. This is where God reveals himself to Samuel in what we would call a saving-relational way and then calls him into ministry.

And what we see here is what we see all through the Bible. It is God who has to call a person into his Kingdom. It is God who has to reveal himself to individuals in a personal way. It is always God who initiates the relationship.

Whether a person is a total pagan with no knowledge of God like Abraham was, or working in the Tabernacle a stone's throw from the Shikemah glory like Samuel was, God has to reveal himself.

In the same way, whether a person has never heard the gospel message of Jesus Christ and grew up in a New Age, gospel-void home, or whether they are a homeschooled kid who has memorized hundreds of Bible verses, God has to reveal himself to them in a personal way or there is no salvation. We are to be faithful to tell people about Jesus, faithful to teach people about Jesus, faithful to have our children serve with us. But ultimately God has to call them into his Kingdom.

We call this the effectual call of God. It's not the call that we do as believers to offer people salvation. We have to do that. But notice no one was nudging Samuel to know the Lord. No, this is the internal work that God does to enact salvation in us. If you're a believer, this is what God did in you when you came to faith in Christ. When you had this internal compulsion to follow Jesus. When you couldn't not follow him, you had to, you had to turn from your sins and confess and follow Jesus as your Savior. Why did we do that? Because of God.

It's not an audible call like Samuel received. But that internal compulsion to follow Jesus is often just as powerful. It is God who ultimately calls a person into his Kingdom.

3) Related to the fact that God is responsible for that, I want to also note that God is persistent in calling. **Read 8-10**

So if you count that up, God called out to Samuel 4 times in the section. It's as though tension is building. Don't miss out on God's call, Samuel! No, God is patient and persistent.

God had always chosen that Samuel would be the man to lead his people and anoint his king, king David. God wasn't going to knock 3 times, throw his hands in the air and shrug and say, "Well, I guess he's just not coming." No God was patient.

Rom. 2:4-5: says that the riches of God's kindness and forbearance and patience...are meant to lead us to repentance.

Listen, we are called to be gentle and gracious and patient and persistent as we tell people about the Lord Jesus. But can I remind us all of something? God is patient and persistent as well. You don't need to agonize or manipulate or play games with people.

When someone comes into the Emergency Room with a heart attack the family doesn't try to manipulate the guy laying there on the gurney to operate on himself. He can't do the surgery, he can't operate - he needs the operation. In the same way, we can't manipulate or force people to believe. All we can do is tell them the gospel in love and pray for God to work in them.

God is responsible for calling.

4) God's Call Means We Proclaim His Message **Read 10-18**

Can you imagine being a teenager - who is basically separated from their parents - and having to tell the spiritual leader of Israel that God is going to bring him and his whole family to an end and that there will be absolutely no forgiveness available to him? This was a heavy message. And God knew it would be a heavy message.

I love how it's described in **Vs. 11. Read**

That's such a great description: their ears will tingle.

That's exactly what God has told Samuel. This is how God often calls people into his Kingdom. You remember Isaiah's vision of the glory of God in **Isa. 6** and his call?

Isa: 6:9-19: And he said, "Go, and say to this people:" 'Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.' Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed."

Basically preach til they can't stand you any more. Isaiah asks God "How long?" God says until everyone is hauled off of the land in judgement.

Ezekiel has an almost identical calling. The Word of the Lord came to him, he sees the glory of God. God sends him to the preach to an absolutely rebellious people.

The message of the gospel under the New Covenant is not much different. There's a reason the apostles were killed and many in the early church were martyred. People don't like the message of the gospel. You can give it as nicely as possible, you can focus on grace as much as you'd like, but people don't like bowing the knee to anyone but themselves.

But here's the reality: If God has called you into his Kingdom, it's because he was persistent and patient to bring you in. And if he has called you into his Kingdom, he's called you to proclaim that same hard message.

It was a gospel message of hope and joy and eternal life and forgiveness and resurrection. But it is also a message of sin and repentance and abandoning all that you have to follow Jesus no matter what he calls you to.

2 Tim 3:12: Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted,

But remember that by God's grace there will be some who believe the message. Who do repent and know the Lord.

I had the privilege of preaching at a memorial service this last week. And you have to understand that as a preacher I critique preachers and especially ones at memorial services. And the reason is because in a funeral situation there's a lot of confusion about the gospel, ignorance about the gospel, opposition to the gospel, on top of lots of other emotions going on. And so many times the gospel message gets muddled, and I don't want to muddle it.

And I didn't know how many people to expect - 100 people at a funeral is pretty good. I think there were 200-250 people there; they just kept coming. And it felt like I was preaching to statues. No one's nodding, no one's smiling, no one comes running up at the end asking "What must I do to be saved?" I honestly have no idea what impact it had.

Some of you working at camp preached the gospel all week to what probably felt like deaf ears and stubborn hearts. But you don't know what the Lord will do with his Word. You don't know what impact it will have 2 days from now, or 2 years, or 2 decades.

Can I tell you something? To some extent it doesn't matter. The results aren't up to us, are they? The results are up to God. Like Samuel we need to make sure we deliver the message. That's all we're called to do. We're like waiters in a restaurant: all we do is get the order to the people - we don't change it or tweak. We just serve it.

Side: Think about this situation from Eli's perspective. The Word of the Lord was rare in those days - that's what **Vs. 1** tells us. There weren't a lot of true prophets. God wasn't giving messages. There wasn't much communication from God at all. In fact, for all we know the only communication Eli ever received from God up to this point was back in chapter 2. Remember that? **Read 2:27-32**

The only recorded time we have of God speaking to Eli is in judgment on his house. And best we know only Eli and this unknown prophet knew about it. Maybe that was just a one off. Maybe that was a fluke, right?

But then some time later God comes calling Samuel in the middle of the night. And Eli knows that it's God. He knows that the Lord is giving young Samuel a message. And he lays there all night long wondering what that is. Why is God giving Samuel the message and not him? And in **Vs. 17** he's desperate to know the Word of the Lord.

NIVZSB: "Five times in this verse Eli uses nouns or verbs related to the Hebrew term "word." The word of the Lord thus receives great emphasis in a time when "the word of the Lord was rare" (v. 1)." He wants to know what God's Word was.

See, Samuel probably didn't know about the other prophet - seems like it was a one-on-one situation. So Eli wants to know: what's God saying to Samuel? And then the truth hits: it's the exact same thing he told the other prophet.

When a pharmaceutical company is testing the effectiveness of their drugs in clinical trials, they use double-blind studies so that people can't possibly effect the outcome, that there can't be any perceived placebo effect so that the researchers know the true effect of the drug. This was essentially a double-blind prophecy of

condemnation on Eli's house for his wickedness. No prophet knew the other, Eli didn't relate any information to either, but the message from God was the same. This is how Eli knows that he knows it's from the Lord. **Read 18**

Isn't that sad? That's a sad response. You'd think someone who knew that they knew the Lord was out to judge them would fall on their face in sorrow and repentance and beg and plead for God's mercy. They'd cry out and sacrifice and make vows. They'd do whatever to come to God.

You know this, but let me remind you: when you proclaim the message of God's judgement and the gospel of his grace sometimes you will get the exact same response. "Well, God's gonna do what God's gonna do." And they actually believe that. Sometimes they'll push back and reject it.

But listen - don't ever forget this - some will turn and believe. If you are here, saved by God's grace, you are a continual testimony to yourself and to others that the Word of the Lord does not always fall on deaf ears. There are some who hear and believe and are saved. Proclaim God's message faithfully.

5) God will honor those who honor his Word. **Read 19-21**

The Lord was with Samuel. This is classic OT language that Samuel was a believer. God was using him and he had called him into his Kingdom as a prophet.

Here's what we learn from Samuel: that if you want God to honor you and you want your words to have weight among people, it starts by honoring his Word.

All of Israel knew Samuel had God's Word. Dan was considered the northern-most limit of Israel, Beersheeba was the southern-most. Dan to Beersheba was like saying coast to coast in America. It covered everything.

Why is it that Samuel is renowned in all Israel? Notice the chain here: The Lord reveals himself to Samuel by the Word of the Lord. And then Samuel turns around and proclaims that word to all Israel. The connection he's making is that Samuel's words were God's words. There was no distinction.

And because there was no distinction, God's word never failed. It never dropped to the ground. It might not have been heeded by all. But it had it's affect on all.

If we want to have a lasting legacy for the Lord we need to make sure that our words are God's words. That what God puts in our hearts through his Word is what we proclaim with our mouths. And no matter anyone's reaction, they will know we speak for the Lord.

Pray