Explore the Bible: Called

May 25, 2016
• *The Explore the Bible lesson for June 12 focuses on 1 Samuel 3.*

A voice in the night

"In those days, the word of the Lord was rare; there were not many visions." After a summary description of Samuel's ongoing training for priestly service, this is the devastating survey of the spiritual landscape of Israel in 1 Samuel 3:1. The description of the unfaithfulness of Eli's sons in chapter 2:12-25 helps explain the situation to some degree. Those whose role was to serve as mediators between God and his people were consumed with selfish desire. They were not even listening, should God even attempt to speak to them.

There are others, however, who heard God's voice at rare times, such as the anonymous "man of God" in 1 Samuel 2:27. The message he delivered was one of judgment against Eli's household. Message received and message delivered, but this man had no ongoing role in the leadership of Israel. The rarity of the word of the Lord heightens the drama of a time of expectation. In days of intertribal fighting and unrepentant sinfulness in the God's own tabernacle, many in Israel must have wondered: When will God speak? How and to whom will he speak? And what will God say?

The answers all come in chapter 3. God speaks to a boy being trained in priesthood, sleeping by the light of the golden lampstand. His mentor's eyes are dimming, and it takes three repetitions of mistaken identity for Eli to realize what must be going on.

1 Samuel 3:7 declares that Samuel "did not yet know the Lord." Samuel must certainly have known *about* Yahweh. As he assisted with whatever the duties of tabernacle that would have been appropriate for his age, he must

have heard the stories and asked the meaning of the daily rituals and sacrifices, as well as the annual feasts. When his mother brought him a new garment each year, she must have retold him the story of how she had prayed for him. He knew about Yahweh, but did not *know* Yahweh in a personal way.

1 Samuel 3:10 records that the LORD "stood there" and this time called Samuel's name twice. The story is amazingly reminiscent of the escalation of methods a parent might use to rouse and motivate a sleeping child. Perhaps if Samuel had not responded this time, he might have found his covers yanked off. Samuel does respond, echoing Eli's instructed response (1 Samuel 3:9), except for Yahweh's name, whether omitted from caution, shock or unfamiliarity, we do not know. Samuel has met Yahweh, and the word of the Lord now comes to him.

Fall and rise

The word Samuel receives is a prophecy, both in the sense of our common perception of a future prediction, but also in the more accurate biblical sense of a statement from God meant to be delivered to humanity. Samuel's first prophetic message is a word of judgment against his mentor and father figure Eli, his sons, and his "house"—that is, any future generations of Eli's family. No wonder Samuel was afraid to report the vision. But with his report to Eli (under the threat of a curse, according to 1 Samuel 3:17) he officially takes on the role of prophet.

Even when the word of the Lord has been given, it is not much use if it is not shared with its intended recipients. We do not know precisely why Samuel was afraid. He clearly expected a negative reaction from Eli. Was he worried about Eli's grief or his anger? Samuel's willingness to deliver the message and accept the consequences marks him out from the false prophets of Israel's history (and our own), who suppress uncomfortable and challenging truths and tell people what they want to hear.

The judgment on Eli and his house can be understood in different ways. At the personal level, it seems Eli is judged for bad parenting. Yet Eli also has been the de facto parent for Samuel and will continue in that role until Samuel reaches maturity. It is the conventional wisdom that good parents raise good children, and bad parents raise bad children, but experience reveals there are exceptions to both. Eli stands in the strange position of having had his own sons become unfaithful, and his semi-adopted son becoming faithful. The judgment on Eli and his house is more a judgment on poor parenting; it is a judgment on a failure to ensure the purity of Israel's worship. This was supposed to be the role and duty of the priest, after all.

Samuel stands in a wholly unique and pivotal role in the history of Israel. He was trained as a priest, a role to which his mother dedicated him and which Eli taught him. He served as judge (1 Samuel 7:15), a role he likely was called upon to perform by the people of Israel. And he was called as a prophet, a role given to him by God.

Yet Samuel's role was not to secure a legacy for himself. His children did not inherit all of these jobs. Part of his faithfulness to God involved him anointing others to serve in other roles for the future God intended. His anointing of Saul and then David ensured he would be the last judge of Israel. He presided over the end of an era and the beginning a new work God would do among his people.

Samuel's call as a prophet and the judgment against Eli and his sons serve as yet another introduction to a theme that will persist through 1 and 2 Samuel. The only sure way to secure a legacy is through faithfulness to God. The priesthood was supposed to be hereditary, passed on through the family. But God is ultimately the one who establishes the priesthood. The monarchy was supposed to be hereditary, passed on through the family. But God is ultimately the one who establishes the monarchy. When the priests become unfaithful, God acts in a new way. When the king becomes

unfaithful, God acts in a new way. God is the only one who secures a future for Israel, and he acts so that the future is built by those who will serve him faithfully.