

## The Calling

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There are two points of view in today's Old Testament reading.

The first is Samuel's story—of a young protégé, serving God in the temple under Eli's guidance. Samuel hears the voice of God and mistakes it for Eli's three times before Eli realizes what's happening. God is calling Samuel. He tells Samuel to go lie down again and, when God calls again, respond with a willingness to listen. Then finally, we learn what God wants to tell Samuel—that's He's planning to enact his punishment on the house of Eli for disobeying God's word. Eli's sons have been blaspheming God, and Eli has not done nearly enough to stop it.

At first, Samuel doesn't know how to respond to what God has told him, so he takes some time to think on it. He remains where he is until morning, then goes to Eli. When Eli demands the truth, Samuel tells him. In a sort of epilogue, we learn that Samuel remains faithful to God throughout his life and becomes known as someone trustworthy.

But there's a second story here too: the story of Eli, who we're told is old and weary. His eyesight has grown poor, and he's lying at dusk in his bed while Eli is lying in the temple.

Samuel suddenly runs in saying, "Here I am, you called me." And Eli says, I didn't call, go lie down again.

Samuel comes to him another two times before it occurs to Eli what's happening. Props to Eli for being so even-tempered, though, right? He's lying down either trying to sleep or otherwise rest, and this youth keeps running in, disturbing him, claiming to hear Eli calling him. And instead of showing any apparent annoyance or telling the boy to stop disturbing his rest, Eli recognizes what must be happening. So he tells Samuel to return to the temple and listen again for God.

The next morning, he asks what God told Samuel, and he accepts the truth of Samuel's words—that Eli has lost favor with God for his actions and inactions, and he and his family will suffer for it.

We get a lot in this short scene—the birth of one ministry and the death of another. The beginning of Samuel's story and presumably the end of Eli's.

The lamp of God described in the first lines as a metaphor for the setting sun can just as easily refer to the sun that's setting on Eli in his declining years. The sun sets on Eli's story, but it rises the next morning on Samuel's story, when he determines to go to Eli and tell him what God said, however much he might not want to.

Similarly, the lamp of God has been passed from Eli to Samuel, like the proverbial torch being passed from one generation to the next.

This is the moment that makes a hero. Because of his honesty with Eli, we're meant to understand that Samuel is able to go forth and continue this resolution of honesty and trustworthiness. Samuel develops a reputation for being trustworthy. His name virtually becomes synonymous with truth.

Etymologically, the name Samuel, in its Hebrew origin, means "name of God" or "God heard." Yes, he heard the voice of God and ultimately becomes the better follower of God's word. But Eli was the one who understood the voice that Samuel was hearing and directed Samuel to listen to that voice.

Still, Samuel's story is in stark contrast with Eli's, both in the movements of today's reading and in the backstory that's described for us.

Eli is old, Samuel is very young.

While Eli is lying in bed, Samuel is in the temple, perpetually jumping up at the sound of the God's voice, mistaking it for Eli's.

And while we're told that Eli has defied God by failing to challenge his sons' blasphemous choices, we see Samuel's devotion to God.

While God gives Samuel knowledge of the future and of his plans for Eli, the older man lies in the dark, literally and figuratively, failed by his eyesight and shortsightedness.

As Samuel becomes a hero in this story, Eli is forced to confront his failings.

And yet, when he learns from Samuel what God intends for his family, Eli accepts God's will.

Today's readings all carry the theme of being called to something greater than we are. The first reading illustrates God calling Samuel to do what Eli was not capable of doing—being a trustworthy prophet and reflection of God's Word enacted on earth.

Eli, though a man of God, had not confronted his sons' blasphemy. He did not live by the words he preached.

The second reading speaks about sins of the body and how we might avoid them, and the third reading shows us the right way to answer God's call: With the enthusiasm and wonder of someone who realizes that Jesus saw us and chose us even before we knew he was calling our name.

But it's not enough to answer God's call. After all, Eli did that once, but then he fell to sin, he fell to complacency; he became blind to the message behind God's call.

In the second reading, Paul warns of being too much of the earth and forgetting where God fits into our lives. We are called to a higher purpose than simply the base interests of our human lives. As sort of a way of shaking the Corinthians out of their shortsighted ways, he asks us all to consider whether we have room in our lives—or our bodies—for the Holy Spirit.

"Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own?" he asks. <sup>20</sup>"For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body."

Those are powerful words.

God proved in I Samuel, chapter 2, the idea that Eli and his sons are "not their own" and how their bodies, in not being used as the temple for God, would be taken away.

Eli's sons were prophesied to both die on the same day, not reaching old age.

Eli was presumably included among those who would not die yet but would still be stripped of their youth, strength, and vitality.

<sup>33</sup>“Every one of you that I do not cut off from serving at my altar I will spare only to destroy your sight and sap your strength,” God promises.

Eli and his sons, were prioritizing their own bodies above their sacrifices to God. In I Samuel Ch. 2, they’re shown to have been stealing meat from the sacrifices the Israelites made to God and not honoring the importance of those sacrifices; Eli’s sons are also sleeping around. By the time Eli confronts them about their wicked ways, it’s too late. God has already slated them for death.

Paul’s words in the second reading resonate here in relation to the sins of the House of Eli: “[D]o you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own?”

These words are meant to hurt. They’re meant to make us consider our wrongdoings. It’s very likely that any time we do wrong, sin against our neighbor, or speak ill of someone, we feel a twinge of regret. That’s our conscience prodding us toward goodness. It’s our humanity attempting to overcome our human failings.

Imagine now that in one of those, our worst moments of selfishness, greed, avarice, or fear, in our attempt to find earthly fulfillment, what we’re actually doing is pushing out the Holy Spirit and ensuring that *in that moment* there’s no space anymore for God.

Let that sink in. Then prepare yourselves, because Paul’s next words are equally cutting: “<sup>20</sup>For you were bought with a price,” he says.

Paul is referring to the sacrifice Jesus made in dying on the cross, ultimately saving us all from eternal damnation.

Reading this line, I was reminded of a scene from the third Harry Potter book, which, if you haven’t read it or seen the movie, introduces us to a couple friends of Harry’s deceased father.

Harry grew up without his parents, so when he meets Professor Lupin in the third book, it’s a big deal, because he finally starts to learn about his father, James. Lily and James Potter were murdered by Voldemort.

In the third book, the wizarding world is on a manhunt for an escaped prisoner, Sirius Black, who’s believed to have murdered several people and is rumored to be looking to murder Harry.

Protections are set on Harry’s school when it looks like Black is headed that way. Powerful creatures called *dementors* are assigned to protect the school and also keep an eye out for Black.

But the *dementors* feed off of human emotion, stealing all the joy from a room and leaving a person, in that moment, with only their worst memories. Whenever they’re near Harry, he hears his mother screaming “not Harry”—the last words she spoke as she tried to protect him from Voldemort before she was murdered.

Later in the book, Harry sneaks out of the school to the nearby village of Hogsmeade because all his classmates are there on a day trip and he doesn’t have a signed permission form letting him go. When he’s caught sneaking back into the school, Professor Lupin covers for him but then admonishes him in private.

“I would have thought that what you have heard when the *dementors* draw near you would have had more of an effect on you,” Lupin says. “Your parents gave their lives to keep you alive, Harry. A poor way to repay them—gambling their sacrifice for a bag of magic tricks.”

And so, Paul tells the Corinthians something similar.

Whereas they—and we—might consider ourselves free to make our own choices and mistakes as we will, Paul would remind us that freedom comes with a price. God may have given us free will, but He still expects us to make choices that support His will.

“<sup>20</sup>For you were bought with a price,” Paul reminds us. God sent His son to die for us, giving his life to keep us alive.

And what are we doing to honor that sacrifice? Are we following God’s word, or doing what we want? Are we answering His call, or ignoring it, like Eli’s sons? Are we including God in our choices, leaving room for the Holy Spirit? Or are we too filled with our own righteousness?

“All things are lawful for me,” Paul would tell us. “But not all things are beneficial.”