



## Group Notes

### *Finding God in the Ordinary*

#### 1 Samuel 3.1-4.1a

##### **Context and Background**

**Context:** The books of 1-2 Samuel have been called some of the most honest historical writing in existence. The books chronicle the transition of the Israelite people from a loose confederation of tribes to a group of people led by a single monarch. Further, the author traces the ever fluctuating faithfulness of the Hebrew people, pulling no punches along the way. Rather, the author chooses to throw the light of reality upon both individuals and the nation as a whole, highlighting brilliant successes and abysmal failures. The author uses these raw and real events to lead his readers to understand God's movement across history. Specifically, how God is moving redemptively, moving to redeem and restore His people as He holds out hope, even in the face of failure and loss. The immediate context involves the rise of Samuel to a position of leadership within Israel. To this point, Eli has been functioning much like a judge (See 1 Sam. 4.18. This language is reminiscent of language used to describe the judges throughout the book of Judges.).

However, the nation of Israel has languished under his leadership, primarily because of his inability and refusal to constrain his sons (1 Sam. 2.12-26). Eli's poor leadership leads to the declaration of God's judgment against his family, thus implying a shift in leadership within Israel (1 Sam. 2.27-36). This shift in leadership begins with God's calling of Samuel in the present text (1 Samuel 3.1-4.1a).

**Background (Leadership):** In the OT, God is portrayed as the primary leader of His people. His desire was that people follow Him alone (Dt. 4.32-40; 6.4-9; 10.12-13; 17.14-20; 1 Sam. 8.1-21). However, God recognized the need and desire for a human touch point in leadership and thus allowed for the role of human authority and leadership (Dt. 17.14-20. See also Rom. 13.1-7.). However, a leader's role was to influence rather than command God's people. This influence was primarily concerned with directing them in such a way that they turned to God and followed Him as their primary leader. Thus, a human leader was to function more as a steward or shepherd of God's people, pointing them beyond himself/herself to God's larger purposes. In the OT, God both sent leaders to His people and allowed His people to request leaders. When God sent leaders, His intent was often to rescue His people from the disastrous effects of their turning from God as their primary leader. In these instances, the leader would often serve as God's instrument of deliverance, a visible sign of God's continued faithfulness and desire for a relationship with His people. This is the primary form of leadership we see in Judges and 1-2 Samuel. When God's people asked leaders, it was often in response to their perceived need for unity and direction, though not necessarily a unity and direction that pointed to God (1 Sam. 8). When leaders in Scripture functioned as God intended, as shepherds of God's people, pointing them back to God, then God's people experienced blessing. When leaders in Scripture refused to shepherd God's people, then we often see God move to replace them with new leaders who would point people to God. This is the primary activity behind the constant changing of leadership in 1-2 Samuel and 1-2 Kings. It is the movement behind the rise of Samuel in 1 Samuel 3.

##### **The Text**

**Spiritual drought (1 Samuel 3.1):** The text begins with a statement about the spiritual condition of Israel. During the time that Samuel was a small boy, ministering under Eli the priest, Israel was experiencing a period of spiritual dryness. The word of the Lord, prophecy, was rare. The words in the text are limited but they speak volumes when considered in the larger OT narrative. Over the past 200+ years, the nation of Israel has experienced a repeating cycle of spiritual vitality and dryness. The cycle is clearly seen in the book of Judges. God's people would turn from God to go their own way, experience the consequences of abandoning God, and then experience deliverance through a judge sent by God to lead them which would result in a time of spiritual vitality. We see in these words that this cycle has not been broken. What is tragic is, that at this point, the cycle has been brought on not by God's people but by the leader God has sent to shepherd His people, Eli. Eli's poor leadership and failure to point people back to God has resulted in ramifications felt by all of God's people (1 Sam. 2.27-3.1). However, the allusion to this cycle in this verse signals that what follows concerns God's movement to once again break into time and deliver His people, more than likely through a new leader.

**A ready and willing heart (1 Samuel 3.2-18):** It is night and Samuel is sleeping in the Tabernacle while Eli is sleeping somewhere nearby. Sometime during the night, God calls out to Samuel. When Samuel first hears God call he thinks that Eli is calling him. This makes sense in light of the statement about Eli's eyesight. Eli would need help moving about at night. Samuel runs to Eli only to hear Eli tell him that he did not call the young boy. This happens three times. Finally, after three such occurrences, Eli realizes that God is attempting to speak to Samuel. He instructs the young child to speak back to God in such a way that acknowledges an open and willing heart, a heart that is willing to listen. Samuel returns to his bed and God speaks a fourth time. Just as Eli instructed, Samuel addresses God indicating that he is willing and ready to listen. God then reveals to Samuel what He is about to do concerning Eli and his family. This revelation is a prophecy or "word from the Lord." Thus, Samuel becomes in this moment a prophet, a prophet who hears from God in a time of spiritual drought. This simple movement implies that God has larger plans for Samuel, plans which involve the present religious state of God's people. The next morning Eli questions Samuel. Though hesitant at first, Samuel reveals God's message to Eli. He willingly serves in his role as a prophet.

**God's deliverance (1 Samuel 3.19-4.1a):** God has called Samuel as a prophet, as one who hears and speaks the words of God in a time of spiritual drought. God uses Samuel to bring deliverance to His people, to function in a role that points people back to Himself. The word of the Lord begins to become common and spreads. People begin to recognize that God is speaking through Samuel. God begins to move as He effects His words, and most importantly, God begins to appear on a regular basis. Through Samuel, God begins to end a time of spiritual dryness. God moves through Samuel to bring deliverance to His people.

**Application:** God's primary desire is to be in relationship with people as the sole-leader of their lives. However, our lives often display a tragic cycle of turning from God and the experience of the consequences of going our own way, a cycle that God seeks to break. God moves to break these cycles by calling people, ordinary people who have ready and willing hearts to hear His call and respond with obedience. It is through these people, people like you and me, that God shepherds people back to Himself, brings great change, brings hope and deliverance. It starts with a ready and willing heart. The question we must ask is, are we ready and willing?

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## *Discussion Guide 2*

### **1 Samuel 3.1-4.1a**

#### **Getting Started: 10 minutes**

- Who is someone that you admire as great? What makes them great in your mind?

**Diving Into the Text: 60 minutes** *(The following questions are intended to provide your group with a simple road map through the text. Feel free to use these questions in ways that best fit your group and the dynamics of your own meeting.)*

**Setting the Stage:** *Greatness is something we all aspire to in our own way. Somewhere, deep down inside, we long to be great, to do great things, to make an impact. We dream of changing the course of history, of leaving an indelible mark on our world; that is, until the cold hard smack of reality wakes us up. Who are we to think that we could ever be great? Oh sure, some of us will be great, but even the greatest among us will be forgotten, our legacy lost in the sands of time. Yet, no matter how hard and biting the wakeup call of reality, we can't escape the dream, the dream of greatness. Perhaps we can't get away from this dream because it isn't our dream. Perhaps the dream is God's dream. Could it be that God too longs for our greatness, not greatness as we define it, a greatness that results in accolades and praise, but greatness in terms of impact? Could it be that God wants to use us to leave an indelible mark, to change the course of history, to do something great through us? Could it be that God wants to show up in us, through us, with us to do great things? Perhaps. But, if this is God's dream, what will it take to make it happen? What will it take for God's dream to become reality in our lives? What would it take to see God, to see great things in our own very ordinary lives?*

- Read 1 Samuel 3.1-4.1a.
- What were the conditions of people's hearts in the text? *(Note: Consider using the background and commentary for help.)*
- To what outcomes did these heart conditions lead?
- When, if ever, have you seen someone completely open and obedient to God?
- What impact did their life make?
- Would you describe your heart as ready and obedient? Can you elaborate?
- What, if anything, keeps you from being completely open and obedient to God's calling?
- What do you imagine God could do through you if you were completely open and obedient? *(Note: One variation of this might be for the group to speak to what they see in an individual rather than the individual speaking about what he imagines.)*
- What change might you be willing to allow God to bring in order to prepare your heart to be more open and obedient?

#### **Wrapping Up: 20 minutes**

- Prayer requests
- Group Prayer time
- House-keeping matters (assignments for the next meeting)