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Samuel Hears God

1 Samuel 3:1–21 · Bloom · Ages 13–19

1 Samuel 3 is a story about a young person hearing God, and about how hard it is to recognize his voice at first.

Background: Hannah prayed for a child and dedicated her son Samuel to the Lord. As a boy he served at the sanctuary in Shiloh under Eli the priest (1 Sam 1–2). Eli's sons were priests who exploited worshippers and abused their position, and Eli rebuked them only weakly. A man of God had already announced judgment on Eli's house (1 Sam 2:27–36). The text doesn't give his age. The Jewish historian Josephus (*Antiquities* V.10.4, 1st century AD) says he was twelve; that is Jewish historical tradition, not Scripture or Church teaching.

Chapter 3 opens by saying that hearing from the Lord had become uncommon. Eli is old and nearly blind. Before dawn, with the lamp of God still burning, Samuel is sleeping in the temple near the ark. The Lord calls him by name. Samuel runs to Eli. Eli sends him back. Twice more. The narrator explains: Samuel had served in God's house, but he had never yet heard God speak to him, so the voice was unfamiliar.

On the third call Eli understands, and he teaches Samuel how to respond: reply to the Lord as his servant, ready to hear him out. The Lord comes, stands there, and calls Samuel twice by name. Samuel answers.

The message is heavy: the judgment on Eli's house will now be carried out, because his sons dishonored God and Eli did not restrain them. In the morning Samuel is afraid to tell Eli, but Eli insists. Samuel tells him everything. Eli accepts it as from the Lord. Samuel grows, the Lord is with him, and none of his words prove empty. All Israel recognizes him as a prophet.

What the Church teaches: the Catechism presents Samuel as learning from Eli how to listen, and as one of the great figures of Israel's prayer (CCC 2578). Prayer is a relationship: God calls first, and we answer (CCC 2567). Contemplative prayer is above all listening to the Word of God (CCC 2716). God has said everything in his Son, Jesus, so public revelation is complete (CCC 65–67); God still speaks to each person through Scripture, the Church, the sacraments and prayer, and a prudent person can hear God speaking in conscience (CCC 1777).

Honest questions:

Does God speak out loud today? Usually not like this. Samuel's call is a special moment in salvation history. But God really does speak, most often in Scripture, through others who guide us, as Eli guided Samuel, and in the quiet of prayer.

How do I know if it's God or just me? Test it: God never contradicts Scripture or the Church's teaching, his voice leads to peace and love, and wise mentors help. Samuel needed Eli.

Why was Eli's family punished? They had been warned. The point isn't that God is harsh, but that leaders who abuse holy things and those who allow it are accountable.

Can young people really be called? Samuel was a kid. So were many saints; St. Carlo Acutis, canonized in 2025, was a teenager who loved the Eucharist.

Church teaching note

Church teaching: Samuel learns from Eli how to listen in prayer (CCC 2578); God calls first, and prayer is our response (CCC 2567); contemplative prayer as hearing the Word (CCC 2716); revelation complete in Christ (CCC 65–67); conscience (CCC 1777). Samuel's age is not given in the text; Josephus (Antiquities V.10.4) says twelve, which is Jewish historical tradition, not Scripture or Church teaching.

Talk about it

1. Why did Samuel need Eli's help to recognize God's call?
2. How can you tell whether something you sense in prayer is really from God?
3. Who is an Eli in your life, someone who helps you listen to God?
4. Catholic connection: read CCC 2578 and 2716. What do they teach about listening in prayer?

Key verse: 1 Sam 3:10. Look it up in your Bible.