

**YOU CAN TEACH AN OLD DOG
1 Samuel 9-10**

**Dr. Howard Batson
First Baptist Church
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You can't teach an old dog _____.
New tricks.

Leopards never change their _____.
Spots.

"He won't ever change."
"He's been that way as long as I've known him."

For some reason, we operate with the idea that men and women will always be who they already are. Somehow, in our narrow equation of consistency of character, we miss the power of the Spirit of God. The Spirit of God has, can, and will continuously change, transform, and dynamically influence human beings. When the wind of the Spirit blows in a new way, change occurs.

"Who let the donkeys out of the barn?"

I don't know. I don't know if somebody left the gate open. I don't know if they kicked down the restraints. But I can tell you that Kish's donkeys – Kish was Saul's father – Kish's donkeys got out.

"Hey son, go find the donkeys." That's what Saul's dad said to him. "Take a servant and go."

They traversed the tribal territories of Benjamin and Ephraim, but still no sign of the lost animals. They didn't find them.

When they finally reached the land of Zuph, Saul said, "Hey, let's go back. My dad is probably not even worried about the donkeys anymore. He's worried about us."

His servant said, "Wait a minute. There's a man of God in this city. If we go ask him, he'll know where the donkeys are. God will give him the word."

"What are we going to give him? I don't have a gift to give him. Even the bread is gone from the sack."

"Well, I have a fourth of a shekel of silver. I'll give it to the man of God and he'll tell us our way."

So they go to the city where the man of God was to be found. They saw some women going out to draw water. (cf. Rebecca, Rachel, Zipporah, and the woman at the well in John 4)

“Is the seer here?”

“Hurry. Hurry. He’s straight ahead of you. Go. He’s going into the city today. The people have a sacrifice on the high place. As soon as you enter the city you will find him before he goes up to the high place to eat. They won’t eat until he gets there, because he has to bless it first.”

As they go up to the city, behold, Samuel was coming out toward them to go up to the high place.

I. God is at work.

Now, the day before, the Lord had said to Samuel, “About this time tomorrow I am going to send you a man from the land of Benjamin, and you shall anoint him to be prince over My people Israel; and he will deliver My people from the hand of the Philistines. For I have regarded My people, because their cry has come to Me.”

Notice – they’re God’s people. They may have demanded a human king, but they still belong to God. “My. My. My” (verse 16)

Verse 17

And when Samuel saw Saul, the Lord said to him, “That’s the man. I talked to you about him. This one will rule over My people.”

Saul – now remember, the only thing he’s doing is looking for lost donkeys – Saul says, “Sir, kind sir. Can you tell me where the seer lives, the man of God?”

“I am the seer. Go up before me to the high place, for you shall eat with me today; and in the morning I will let you go, and will tell you all that is on your mind. As for your donkeys...” – look, he’s a man of God, he already knew – “...which were lost three days ago, do not set your mind on them, for they have been found. And for whom is all that is desirable in Israel? Is it not for you and for all your father’s household?” (vs. 18-20).

The irony of the story is this: the key actor is not really Saul. It is God and Samuel. Saul is simply acted upon. God and Samuel do the acting. Even Saul, here, is being sent by God. “I will send,” God says, “the man to you.” As he hunts the donkeys, God is doing the sending.

Notice in verse 17 what God says. “Here is the man.” There is no ambiguity. There is no confusion. This is the one. God has chosen Saul. “Get your mind off donkeys,” God seems to be saying to Saul, “for the desire of Israel (that is, to be king).”

All around us, every day and every way, God is at work – the unseen hand. *A Reader’s Digest* article entitled, “It Happened on the Brooklyn Bridge Subway,” is as old as 1949 and yet is as shocking today as it was when it was printed so many decades ago.

On January 10, 1948, just over two years after the conclusion of World War II, Marcel Sternberger got on a train in the Brooklyn subway he had never been on before. He normally took a different line, but he had changed his schedule in order to visit a sick friend that morning and was now boarding a noon train to get to work. The train was full. But just as he stepped in, one man jumped up and ran off, realizing he was about to miss his station. Sternberger quickly took the seat and sat down. Next to him was a man reading a Hungarian newspaper. Sternberger had been born in Hungary and though he would not normally strike up conversation with strangers in the subway, he felt compelled to say something. He looked over the man's shoulder and said in Hungarian, "I hope you don't mind if I glance at your paper." The man was surprised to be addressed in his native language, and during the half-hour ride to town, they began to chat.

Sternberger's companion voluntarily shared his tragic story. His name was Paskin, and he had been a law student when the war started. He was eventually put into a labor battalion and sent to the Ukraine. Later he was captured by the Russians and put to work burying the German dead. After the war he covered hundreds of miles on foot, returned to home in Debrecen, Hungary, and discovered his entire family gone. Strangers were living in the apartment once occupied by his father, mother, brothers, and sisters. When he reached the apartment he and his wife had shared, it also was occupied by strangers. Finally, he located old friends in Debrecen who had survived the war. They sadly informed him his entire family was dead. The Nazis had taken them and his wife to Auschwitz, where they were all killed in the gas chambers.

Stunned by the news, the man fled Hungary, which had become a funeral land for him. He headed toward Paris and immigrated to the United States in October 1947. As Sternberger listened, the story seemed somehow familiar. Suddenly he remembered why. He had recently met a young woman at the home of friends who had also been from Debrecen. She had been taken to Auschwitz, but was then transferred to work in a German munitions factory. All her relatives had been killed in the gas chambers. After she had been liberated by the Americans, she had been brought to New York in the first boatload of Displaced Persons in 1946. Sternberger had been so moved by her story he had written down her address and phone number, hoping to invite her to meet his family in order to help with her terrible loneliness and grief.

Though he thought it impossible, he pondered, "Could there be a connection between these two people – so far away, so many miles from home?" When he reached his station, he stayed on the train with his new friend, and asked, as casually as possible, "Is your first name Bela?"

The man went pale as he said, "Yes! How did you know?"

Sternberger fumbled for his address book, as he asked, "Was your wife's name Marya?"

Looking as though he might faint, Paskin said, "Yes! Yes!"

Sternberger suggested they get off at the next station without explaining why. He took Paskin to a nearby phone booth. While Paskin stood there like a man in a trance, Sternberger dialed the number. After a long delay, he had Marya Paskin on the line. Sternberger reminded her of their recent chance meeting, and she remembered him. Without explaining why, Sternberger asked

Marya where she had lived in Debrecen before the war, and she told him the address. Sternberger turned to Bela and said, “Did you and your wife live on such-and-such a street?”

“Yes!” Bela exclaimed, and he turned as white as a sheet and trembled.

Sternberger urged him to stay calm, but then explained that something miraculous was about to happen to him. Then he handed Bela the phone, saying, “Here, take this telephone and talk to your wife.”

When Paskin realized he was really talking to his Marya, he broke into uncontrollable crying. Sternberger sent him by taxi to the address to be reunited with his wife. (Paul Deutschman, It Happened on the Brooklyn Subway,” *Reader’s Digest*, May 1949, p. 45-48)

The article continues to describe the emotional reunion between the Paskins, each of whom thought the other was dead. And now each – so many miles away (Brooklyn, NY to Debrecen, Hungary is 4,451 miles) – in America.

Mere chance that the only guy who could have ever gotten these two back together actually took a different train that day, sat in that vacant seat, struck up a conversation in Hungarian, and happened to have the information about another Hungarian he’d meet. Happenstance?

God is at work in the world.

Here is Saul looking for lost donkeys, but here is God at work, as God says to the prophet, “Tomorrow I will send the man.”

When Samuel asserts that everything desirable in Israel is “for you and your household,” well, even the uncomprehending Saul catches what’s going on here. “Oh, no, no. Not my family. I’m a Benjamite. That’s the smallest tribe in Israel. My family is the least important family in the tribe of Benjamin. Why are you speaking to me like this – that everything desirable for Israel is for me and my household?”

Samuel doesn’t address Saul’s protest. He just starts treating him like a king.

“Here, sit here.” Gives him the seat of a king, the honored place. Special food. Special rest. Because God had selected Saul as king, Samuel already acts as if he is king.

Samuel anoints him king in chapter 10. Look at verse 1.

Samuel took the flask of oil, poured it on his head, kissed him and said, “Has not the Lord anointed you a ruler over His inheritance?”

The use of oil is a symbol of the Spirit of Yahweh in several Old Testament passages (Isaiah 61:1; Zechariah 4:4). To be anointed with oil is to be empowered by Yahweh.

Then God says to Samuel, “I’m going to give you some signs to give to Saul.” Samuel gives Saul the signs – signs that represent the fact that, indeed, all that has happened is the plan and the will

and the way of God. This new mandate for Saul – that he is going to be king – seems so drastic, so out of character. It demands such a change in his life that he can't be sure.

“The first sign you'll have is that you will meet two men who will give assurances about the lost donkeys.” That happens in verse 2. Notice what he says, “They will say to you, ‘The donkeys which you went to look for have been found.’”

“The next sign,” he says in verse 3, “is that three men will appear to you and give you food.”

“The third sign is that you will come upon a band of prophets and you will prophesy.”

II. God changes everything.

And with this promise, Saul will be turned into another man, a new creature empowered for God's special purpose.

In verse 5, he tells him, “There will be a group of prophets. They'll have harps and tambourines, a flute and a lyre before them, and they will be prophesying.” But notice in verse 6, “Then the Spirit of the Lord will come upon you mightily, and you shall prophesy with them and be changed into another man.”

There it is. Another man. Saul, you will change. You will be another man.

But, notice the verb “change” is used in verses 6 and 9.

Verse 9

Then it happened when he turned his back to leave Samuel, God changed his heart; and all those signs came about on that day.

Another man in verse 6, with another heart (v. 9).

Don't ever let anyone tell you that you can't change. By your own power, by your own might, by your own will – you'll never change. But by the power and might and the will of God, you will become another man with another heart.

With God, a leopard might not only change his spots – he might get stripes!

God is in the business of changing people. God can change Saul. God can change me. And God can change you. Don't ever tell me what God can't do. Don't ever limit the power of the Creator of the cosmos. Don't ever make a statement about what God can or cannot do with anyone, for the power of the Spirit of God will blow where it will and change will occur.

Some of you are making bad choices. You're beginning to find yourself in the company of those who are going to destroy your character and destroy your witness, destroy your influence. Some of you have made bad choices for so long you're afraid you can't make a good choice.

You can change. God changes people.

He is in the business of change.

I've got a confession. It was years ago – a man came down the aisle, saying he wanted to change everything about his life. I knew a little bit of his history. I thought this was one more move in a cycle to manipulate the church, his family, and God. I went through the motions. "You bet, bud. Let's do it." But in my heart, I truly felt like he was acting. It wasn't anything real.

Man, was I wrong!

I've since done his funeral, and I can tell you on that day – when the pastor had his doubts – that man and God were changing everything in his life.

All his behavior changed. His vocabulary changed. The way he did life changed. He was here every time we unlocked the doors. If I said we're meeting Thursday night at 2:00 a.m., he would have been here waiting for me when I got here. It was that way for years after he came down the aisle.

He became one of those persons in my life who began to teach me things about obedience, excitement, the Spirit of God, and the power of God. Ministered to me. Ministered to my family. Ministered to the church family. He became one of the most liked men in our church.

On the day he was changing, your pastor thought, "Yes, right, bud." And when I did his funeral, he was – to me – a spiritual giant. There was nothing in his history – in my defense – there was nothing in his past behavior that would lead one to conclude that he would be this different person, forever – until death. But he was. Totally different.

How is it that you and I have become convinced through the years that the power of God Almighty, who took dust and created man, cannot change the hearts of men and women? The message here, verse 9 and verse 6, is God changed everything about Saul. "You will be another man."

This man was changed in relationship with his church family. He was changed in relationship with his children. His family. Everybody noticed. Something is radically different about him.

At first, I think we all waited for it to play out, for the excitement to wane, for the seed to be in the shallow soil. But it wasn't. It was deep. It was well-rooted. And that day, to walk by the Spirit of God, he became a different man.

What does God want to do with you? How does He want to change you? How can He make you another man with another heart?

He can. He will. God will change you into another man, another woman. God will change your heart. You're not trapped. You're not defeated. You're not downtrodden. Your pattern is not set. The die is not cast. The mold can be melted, and you can be a new man, a new woman.

Saul was on an innocent mission to find his father's lost donkeys. He was not looking for a kingdom. He appears humble, even mystified, by the honors being heaped on him (9:21). But as he turns to take his leave of the prophet, "God changed Saul's heart" (10:9). God is at work in Saul, and he will never be the same.

God will set you free. God can make you into another man with another heart.