

Great things happen when we do what God tells us!

But it isn't easy for us to do.

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Have you ever tried driving forward while looking constantly in the rearview mirror?

We probably wouldn't live to tell about it!

Have you ever tried cleaning out an attic, or basement, or garage and didn't complete it because it was too hard to let go of the memorabilia of bygone days?

Or have you ever let a past failure or bad experience prevent you from trying again or doing something new?

In all of these cases, we are trying to drive our lives forward while looking in the rearview mirror.

We allow the past to determine the future.

And as a result, we don't get very far.

This was Samuel's problem when the Lord God encountered him in our first reading today.

God had sent him to anoint Saul King over Israel.

Samuel had invested time and energy in Saul's rule.

But it did not last.

Because Saul had a problem – he did not do what the Lord told him to do; He decided to do what he wanted.

And because of his failure to obey, God removed him from kingship.

God rejected him as king. He was no longer able to govern the people.

And Samuel was grieving this loss of Saul as king.

Samuel was driving while looking in the rearview mirror and not getting anywhere.

The Lord told him to get over it and move on.

The Lord had plans for Samuel and for his people Israel.

The Lord gave Samuel a new mission – *Fill your horn with oil and go. I will send you to Jesse in Bethlehem, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons.*

Notice how the forward direction for Samuel's next steps are God's mission – God's will – God's Word – not his own.

This is so important for us to remember.

As with our attics, garages, and basements, the church often gets stuck in the past.

Like Samuel, the Lord finds us grieving what used to be

- holding on to the old music,
- the old structures,
- the old ways of doing things.

God knows I sometimes hang on to the past for dear life!

But the future does not lie in the past.

As he did with Samuel, God finds us looking backward
and stands in front of us – in the future
– and calls us to turn our heads toward him.

From the future, our dear Lord calls us to go and carry out the mission he gives us.

“Fill your horn with oil and go” is not all that different from “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you.”

In Jesus Christ, God has given his people a mission – a mission to obey – **and we cannot obey it while focusing on the rearview mirror.**

Perhaps so many churches are declining and dying because they are doing just that – clinging to the past.

Instead of obeying God’s call to go into the future, they take things into their own hands to recreate the past thinking it is something new.

When Saul did that, the Lord God rejected him as king.

He lost his government.

Churches have closed.

I recently heard a pastor reflect that most congregational life in the western world is a closed system – **the saved ministering to the saved.**

Where Christianity is growing the fastest – in Africa

– **the churches are going out to bring unchurched people to faith.**

They are talking with unbelievers,
building relationships, sharing the Gospel of Jesus.

There, congregations are growing primarily by conversion rather than by biology or transfer.

We need to learn from them.

It means leaving our rearview comfort zones.

It means doing what is uncomfortable.

It means risking the very thing Jesus promised we would face – persecution, criticism, refusal, contempt.

Because in the final analysis, what God calls us to do is not about us at all.

It is about all the people in the world who need to know Jesus – and who look at us Christians to see him.

When we obey God and walk forward into God's mission,

we can be confident that our labors will bear fruit for the kingdom of heaven.

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Let's go back to our story.

Samuel is reluctant to take the first step into this new mission because he is afraid.

He is afraid of being killed by Saul.

But the Lord has a plan. The Lord provides the way out.

When we face forward and move in the direction God calls us, we need not fear.

- God has already been where we are going.
- God is already at our destination.
- God does not ask of us anything that he has not already been through in Jesus.
 - Persecution and suffering? Jesus went to the cross.
 - The joy of seeing someone come to faith? Jesus healed and welcomed sinners.
 - The frustration of not being listened to? Jesus faced that, too.

When he gave the Great Commission, Jesus added: “*And see, I am with you always, to the end of the age.*”

We do not take a single step into God’s mission of the future apart from Jesus.

And obedience does start with a single step.

Samuel did not get the whole mission all at once.

The Lord gave it to him step by step.

We can expect that God will be the same with us – patient and persistent.

As we leave the past behind and move forward into the future God envisions for us,

We may trust him to give us what we need as we need it.

I'll admit, this is really hard for planners and control freaks like me.

I am tempted like Saul, like Peter, like every disciple I've met – to take things into my own hands.

To trust my own judgment, my own vision.

But truly, I am as blind as the man Jesus met.

I need – we need – the vision only Jesus gives
when he washes us of our sins of pride,
stubbornness and hard-heartedness.

We need the vision that comes with the water from the pool whose name means “Sent”.

We need the vision of the One

**whose cleansing blood was shed for us on the cross
and whose life turns our heads to the future.**

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As we receive Jesus today, we leave here as those who are sent by God into the world to make disciples.

In the power of the Holy Spirit,

let us obey God's mission and fill our horns with the oil of gladness and love, truth and mercy –

And let us pour out that oil upon people

- who do not know Christ's love for them,
- or who have forgotten it,
- or who have rejected it,
- or who feel alienated from it.

Let us pay attention to the people God is choosing to anoint as his people.

They are people who are sad, sick, hurting and struggling.

They are people who are angry at God, who long for a glimpse of grace.

They are people we meet in waiting rooms, shopping lines, salons and businesses.

They are both friends and strangers.

Some will not be interested – God did not choose the first seven of Jesse's sons to be king.

But there is no doubt that God will lead you to people of his choosing.

– **Then comes the relationship, the outpouring of the oil.**

The first step is eye contact and a word –

You are not alone.

God bless you.

What is your name, I will pray for you.

May I pray with you now?

God who created you, loves you.

I am sorry.

You are a blessing!

How can I help?

The next step might be an invitation – to further conversation, for coffee, or to worship with you.

Or it might be an act of service.

When we listen to his Word, God will help us step by step.

And we will know the power of God to transform lives with his saving love in Jesus Christ.

And with transformed lives, the church grows.

This is the future God calls us to follow Jesus into.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen