

## Caleb: Courage against Great Odds

Numbers 13:1-3, 13:25-33; Numbers 14:1-10, 14:22-24

Unsung Heroes and Heroines of the Faith

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Sunday, October 5, 2003

When the Hebrews marched out of Egypt in that singular event called the Exodus, they should have reached the Promised Land in less than three months. The distance was about three hundred miles, so had they walked as few as five miles a day, pausing at Mount Sinai to receive the law and resting every Sabbath Day, they could have covered the distance easily within ninety days. Instead, it took them forty years, and today's text tells us why.

The decision to advance into Canaan hung in the balance between the Nay-sayers and the Able-sayers, between those who said "We are not able," and those who said, "We are well able." Of the twelve spies sent to reconnoiter the land, ten were Nay-sayers. When they saw that the Promised Land would be no push-over, they conveniently forgot that God had already defeated the world's greatest superpower in their behalf. They had seen Pharaoh's chariots mired in Red Sea mud and his infantry dragged down under the unforgiving waves. They had seen it but had forgotten it. So when they saw the fortified cities in Canaan, they left God out of the equation and sounded the bugle of retreat.

My problem is that the Nay-sayers are not out there but in here. I don't know how the seeds of paranoia got planted in my personality, but I too magnify the impediments in order to justify my detours from difficult duty. I have a bulging catalogue of excuses for not getting involved. I'm too young or too old; too ignorant or too unskilled; too fragile or too tired; too busy or too committed, too poor or too heavily in debt, too inexperienced or too full of doubts. About ten-twelfths of me is occupied by Nay-sayers. With Cain I ask, "Am I my brother's keeper?" With Moses I say, "Lord, please send someone else." And with Peter I cry out, "Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man."

Ah, but there is another voice in me, sometimes soft and feeble, but there nevertheless. And there is another voice in you as well. I call it the "well-able" voice in honor of this unsung hero named Caleb who said, "Let us go up and once and occupy it, for we are 'well able' to overcome it."

What made this man stand up against great odds? Not his own capability, surely, for he was only one against the many. Nor was it the backing of the military, for the Israeli army was little more than a rag-tag bunch of ex-slaves. Nor was it the example set by his superiors. "Moses and Aaron fell on their faces before all the assembly of the congregation of the Israelites," writes the reporter on the scene. That, frankly, is the posture of defeat. Moses, the chief executive officer, and Aaron, the chief operating officer, are ready to throw in the towel. No, here is the source of Caleb's courage: "If the Lord is pleased with us, he will bring us into this land and give it to us." (14:8) Well, there was no doubt in Caleb's mind that the Lord WAS pleased with Israel and WOULD bring them into the land if only the people would remember how the Lord had redeemed them from slavery in Egypt, how the Lord had rescued them from Pharaoh's cavalry, and how the Lord had pledged his protection at Sinai. Caleb knew he was pursuing God's purposes when he said "Let us go up at once and occupy it." And if you are pursuing God purposes, you too can stand up against great odds. But the minute I say that, I must caution you: be sure that it is the will of God, for too many bloody crusades have been launched by people whose banners bore only their own self-serving slogans.

Then how can we be sure? No doubt there are many tests, but for now consider the two found in our text. The first is the test of REDEMPTIVE PRECEDENT. All through history God has been in the business of redeeming humanity, so does your cause bear any resemblance to God's acts of love and justice? From God's deliverance in the recent past Caleb extrapolated a promise of God's protection in the near future. The God who liberated Israel from Egypt would surely champion Israel in Canaan. And when we watch God at work in his Son Jesus we can be sure of at least this much: if there are mouths to be fed, rights to be protected, children to be saved, natural resources to be safeguarded, disease to be wiped out, violence

to be eradicated, and good news to be proclaimed to all the world, we are standing on solid ground, and we can go for it even if we are in the minority. Biblical precedent: that's the first test.

And the second is TRUSTWORTHY ENDORSEMENT. The first time Caleb spoke up, he was all alone, and that's problematic. When someone says, "The Lord told me to do this or that," (or, more to the point, "The Lord told me to tell YOU to do this or that.") yellow caution lights start flashing in my brain. Unless it's Jesus Christ who's doing the talking, I don't trust solitary revelations, and neither should you. But when Caleb spoke up the second time, Joshua the son of Nun seconded the motion. And Joshua's endorsement was trustworthy because he too had seen the land and its people. And here was his assessment: "Do not fear the people of the land, for they are no more than bread for us; their protection is removed from them, and the Lord is with us; do not fear them." "But," says the reporter, "the whole congregation threatened to stone them." And before long they turned tail and plunged back into the wilderness from which they had come.

If you stand up against great odds, you may lose the battle. It is a cross, after all, not a crown, that symbolizes our faith. Yet the cross is only the penultimate moment in our Lord's incarnation. On Good Friday Jesus lost the battle, but on Easter Sunday he won the war. And forty-five years after Caleb lost his battle, "Joshua blessed him, and gave Hebron to Caleb . . . for an inheritance. So Hebron became the inheritance of Caleb . . . because he wholeheartedly followed the Lord, the God of Israel." (Joshua 14:13-14)

Is there a Caleb anywhere in this congregation? A woman, a man, a teenager, with enough courage to stand up against great odds? If you think you haven't got what it takes, remember this: "A hero is no braver than anyone else; it's just that she is brave five minutes longer."

What is God calling you to do right now? Dare to be a Caleb. Dare to be brave...five minutes longer.