

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #108:

CALEB, UNSUNG BIBLE HERO

By John Temples

Hmmm....Caleb. Where have I heard about him? Ah, yes, now I remember! He was one of the twelve spies sent to look over the land of Canaan before the Israelites moved in. As you remember, ten of the spies came back with a defeatist message. Only two gave a positive report, Joshua and Caleb. Joshua gets all the attention, but God evidently considers Caleb worthy of our study. In fact, Caleb is mentioned in the Bible 33 times!

Caleb is especially interesting because we get to see him in three different stages of his life, spanning 50+ years:

- The exodus period, before going into Canaan;
- The period of the wilderness wandering, some 38 years;
- The settlement period, when all the tribes finally received their inheritance in the land.

All his life, Caleb never wavered from his faith in God and his loyalty to Joshua and his people.

We first meet Caleb in Numbers 13, just before the twelve spies went into Canaan. This would have been about two years after the Israelites left Egypt. We talk about the Israelites taking 40 years to get to the Promised Land, but actually they reached it much sooner. They spent nearly a year at Mount Sinai, then arrived at Kadesh Barnea on the southeastern border of Canaan less than two years after leaving Egypt. So they could have gone in 38 years sooner if they had only trusted God!

At this time, the time of the sending of the spies, Caleb was a young man, full of youthful strength and optimism. He and Joshua were probably about the same age, 40 or so. We first see what kind of man Caleb was at that age in Numbers 13. The spies had returned and were giving a report to the people. Think about the

pressure that was on Caleb. Each of the spies has given their assessment, and out of the ten that have spoken before you, every one of them had said, "It can't be done." What would Caleb say? Verse 30 says, "Then Caleb quieted the people before Moses and said, 'Let us go up at once and take possession, for we are well able to overcome it.'"

Actually, his report should not surprise us, because we know something else about Caleb at this time: he was a born leader with a noble lineage. When God told Moses to send men to spy out the land, He told him to get "leaders" (Numbers 13:2). Verse 3 says the spies were all "men who were heads of the children of Israel." Caleb was of the tribe of Judah, the pre-eminent tribe (Numbers 13:6). God paid Caleb quite a compliment in Numbers 14:24, saying that he had a "different spirit" and "followed God fully."

Another praiseworthy trait of Caleb was courage. Yes, there were giants in the land (the main reason for the gloomy report of the ten spies); but Caleb was willing to face them. He was also willing to face the wrath of his own brethren. Numbers 14 tells of the Israelites crying against God and Moses and wanting to return to Egypt. Joshua and Caleb pleaded with them to obey and trust God. This so enraged the people that they were ready to stone Joshua and Caleb, until God intervened.

Because of their faith and optimism, Caleb and Joshua escaped the wrath of God upon the spies. Numbers 14:36-38 tells us, "Now the men whom Moses sent to spy out the land, who returned and made all the congregation complain against him by bringing a bad report of the land, those very men who brought the evil report about the land, died by the plague before the Lord. But Joshua the son of Nun and Caleb the son of Jephunneh remained alive, of the men who went to spy out the land." Not only did Joshua and Caleb outlive the spies, they outlived every other Israelite over the age of 20. They were the only two of that group (out of 603,550 men) to survive the entire 40 years and enter the Promised Land.

The next period of Caleb's life is the 38 years of wandering in the wilderness. We have no direct references to Caleb during this period, but we can surmise some things. During this time, Caleb would have gone from age 40 to about age 80.

Those are prime and meaningful years in a person's life. But for Caleb, they must have seemed to be frustrating and wasted years. Do you think Caleb ever said to his fellow wanderers, "If only you had listened to me..."? Put yourself in Caleb's place, slogging through the sand along with all the other people--

- Knowing that you and they could have been in the Promised Land long before if the people had listened to you instead of the ten spies;
- Knowing that you were suffering all that heat and deprivation day after day through no fault of your own;
- Watching all your companions die in the desert, one by one and day by day, again due to unbelief.

All of that would have been a severe test of faith. There would have been plenty of opportunities to be bitter, against God and against the people. But at least as far as the record is concerned, Caleb trudged along in silent faith, trusting God to work it all out.

The final period of Caleb's life is the settlement period, after the Israelites had come into the land. Most of the military campaigns were over and Joshua was dividing up the land among the tribes. Here is the record from Joshua 14:6-14:

"Then the children of Judah came to Joshua in Gilgal. And Caleb the son of Jephunneh the Kenizzite said to him: 'You know the word which the Lord said to Moses the man of God concerning you and me in Kadesh Barnea. I was forty years old when Moses the servant of the Lord sent me from Kadesh Barnea to spy out the land, and I brought back word to him as it was in my heart. Nevertheless my brethren who went up with me made the heart of the people melt, but I wholly followed the Lord my God. So Moses swore on that day, saying, "Surely the land where your foot has trodden shall be your inheritance and your children's forever, because you have wholly followed the Lord my God." And now, behold, the Lord has kept me alive, as He said, these forty-five years, ever since the Lord spoke this word to Moses while Israel wandered in the wilderness; and now, here I am this day, eighty-five years old. As yet I am as strong this day as on the day that

Moses sent me; just as my strength was then, so now is my strength for war, both for going out and for coming in. Now therefore, give me this mountain of which the Lord spoke in that day; for you heard in that day how the Anakim were there, and that the cities were great and fortified. It may be that the Lord will be with me, and I shall be able to drive them out as the Lord said.’ And Joshua blessed him, and gave Hebron to Caleb the son of Jephunneh as an inheritance. Hebron therefore became the inheritance of Caleb the son of Jephunneh the Kenizzite to this day, because he wholly followed the Lord God of Israel.”

I love the words of this 85-year-old man: “Give me this mountain.” You know, when you’re 85 and you’ve had a hard life, and land is being handed out, you want a nice, flat piece of ground with lots of trees and water. And you don’t want to have to fight any squatters. But Caleb says, “I’ll take the mountain, and I’ll take on the giants.” I firmly believe that at that moment God smiled in heaven at this man’s enthusiasm.

So what can we learn from Caleb? Here are three qualities he possessed that are worthy of our imitation:

He had a different spirit (Numbers 14:24). His spirit was different from the ten spies, who were defeatists. It was different from the rest of the Israelites, who were complainers. If you have a can-do attitude about life and you don’t complain at whatever Providence hands you, you are truly blessed of God; and you will certainly stand out from the world.

He followed the Lord fully (same text). Sadly, many try to serve the Lord with divided hearts and allegiances:

- Like Solomon, who was led away by his foreign wives.
- Like the Christians James spoke of who sought to be friends with the world (James 4:4).
- Like the people Jesus spoke of, who tried to serve two masters.

To be truly happy in the Lord, we need to follow Him 100 percent, with undivided affections. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind” (Matthew 22:37).

He trusted God over the long haul. He was faithful to God at age 40; he trusted God all through the wilderness wandering; and he begged God for one more challenge at age 85. You know, the Lord needs all ages in the church. He needs older people with maturity and wisdom; He also needs younger people with zeal and a “can-do” attitude.

Age 40 is an especially dangerous time for many of us. Around that age, we--particularly we men--see our youth slipping away. We feel the need to DO something to avoid being a failure. There’s an interesting contrast between Moses at age 40 and Caleb at the same age. Moses at 40 was a hothead who saw himself as Israel’s deliverer and impulsively killed an Egyptian slave driver. Caleb at age 40 was a brave spy and soldier, but he knew that his strength lay with God, not with himself.

Middle age is dangerous, too, especially if you’re slogging through a desert for something you didn’t do.

And old age is an especially dangerous time. When you’re that age, you’ve heard all the sermons; you’ve left behind many of the physical temptations of life (or they have left you). There’s a tendency to slack off and take it easy. Don’t do it! Learn from Caleb. Only those who are faithful until death will receive the crown of life. Maybe our prayer in old age ought to be that of Caleb: “Give me this mountain.”
--John Temples