

CALEB AND CHARACTER

By John Gagliardi

Part of being human – whether Christian or not – means that we will always face tests and trials. The Bible tells us that “...man is born to trouble as surely as sparks fly upwards” (Job 5: 7).

For the non-Christian, trouble is an end in itself – that’s life, deal with it! But for we believers, it is a whole other “deal” – testing and pruning are a part of the Christian walk, and God tells us that He chooses to discipline and refine those He loves.

He did it to Abraham, our father in the faith, so why should we be surprised that He also does it to us – we are, after all, heirs to the promises God made to Abraham (Genesis 12: 1-3), and by extension, heirs to the (sometimes painful, usually confusing) processes through which the promises are fulfilled.

We are called to be the “head and not the tail”, and “above only and not beneath” (Deuteronomy 28: 13). That means we are to excel in whatever calling we have been given, whether it is in the home, the church or the marketplace, and to lead a fallen and confounded world by example.

And where the difference becomes patent is in the area of how we deal with the trials and troubles, and the successes and triumphs. The difference is in the area of character. In this modern media-mad world, celebrity is paramount, and personality is king. But while personality (and talent) may get you to the top, only character alone – grounded in strong Biblical ethics and morality – will keep you there.

The Bible is full of great and inspiring stories of men and women who have had the character to withstand the onslaughts and the buffeting of life to win through to great and triumphal victories that have echoed down the annals of time to us – Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, Peter, Paul, John and – of course – Jesus himself, the “Author and Finisher” of our faith (Hebrews 12: 2).

One name that is not often included among the pantheon of Biblical faith heroes is Caleb – often seen in the shadow of Joshua and usually lost in the much bigger story of the march into the Promised land.

And yet Caleb is a man of great character, a man who never did push himself to the forefront to be a “celebrity”. He first appears in the Book of Numbers as one of the leaders chosen to spy out the Promised Land, and disappears after a final appearance in the Book of Judges. He is not mentioned at all in the New Testament, even among the list of faith heroes starting with Abel and ending with Samuel (Hebrews 11: 4-32).

The keynote to Caleb’s whole story is that, no matter what – no matter how many giants and walls reared up front of him – he “wholeheartedly” followed God. In other words, he trusted God and he obeyed God (Joshua 14: 14). His character had been refined and tested in the “furnace of affliction” and even at the ripe old age of 85, he was able to declare, “give me this mountain!” (Joshua 14: 12).

Rowland Croucher in an article *Give Me This Mountain* says one of the big things about Caleb is that he never stopped growing: “Caleb is one of my Biblical heroes. We don’t know very much about him, but the few clues we are given tell us of a very impressive man.

“Caleb was an Edomite, a descendant of Esau rather than Jacob ... but despite his adverse pedigree, Caleb rose to a position of prominence among the tribes of Israel. He refused to be a ‘prisoner of his scripting’, and with Joshua and 10 others, explored a land ‘flowing with milk and honey’.

“But there were two problems – giants, and the walled cities they lived in ... Ten of the spies measures the giants against themselves – ‘we’re like grasshoppers’. Caleb measured the giants against God (and) was prepared to do what leaders are supposed to do – lead.”

Croucher makes a good point – Joshua and Caleb represented a minority opinion against the other 10, and had to stand on their character to push through and be strong enough to be comfortable in the minority.

He says: “Where you stand determines what you see ... Instead of comparing the giants with themselves, the 10 spies should have compared them to God. The unbelief equation is simply: ‘facts without faith equals despair’

“A person of vision and faith does the most difficult thing now, and leaves the impossible until later. That was Caleb ... fear looks at the problems, faith claims the opportunities ... despite the huge problems, Caleb plus God was a majority.”

Caleb stands out as a singular man of character in several ways:

- He was a man of courage (Numbers 13: 21 and 30; 2 Timothy 1: 7)
- He was a man of dedication (Joshua 14: 14; 2 Timothy 4: 15)
- He was a man of faith and absolute trust in God and His promises (Numbers 14: 9; Romans 8: 31, 37)
- He surrendered his life totally to God in complete obedience (Numbers 14: 24; Joshua 14: 8 and 9).

Caleb lives a long and Godly life, and although starting off with marked disadvantages (such as being an “outsider”, the son of Jephunnah the Kenezite, a descendant of Esau (Joshua 14: 6; Genesis 15: 19 and 36: 11), he chose not to claim “victimhood” (like so many in our modern society), but just got on with it and stood firm in the face of giants, ridicule, attacks, discouragement and disbelief.

Choosing character above personality and popularity, and fearing God rather than the “majority” around him, he had enough strength to “follow God wholeheartedly” (Joshua 14: 8) and face down the giants in the land, and the “giant” of public opinion in his own society. He wasn’t prepared to compromise his values and his beliefs just to “get along” with the majority, and decades later, was still standing strong and firm in his faith.

It is a lesson for those of us who live and work in today’s “progressive” culture of secular humanism and selfish pragmatism that so permeates every facet of 21st century life. Caleb wasn’t afraid to stand out from the crowd and, like Martin Luther, declare: “Here I stand; I can do no other. God help me. Amen.”

Like Caleb – and Luther – we also can be called to take a stand against popular opinion and “stand out from the crowd” - and run the risk of being shunned, ridiculed and demeaned. It is not always comfortable to be the odd man out – when all those around us are saying the land is full of scary giants, to stand up and declare: “The land we passed through and explored is exceedingly good ... do not be afraid of the people of the land, because we will swallow them up” (Numbers 14: 7-9).

It is not easy – but it is vitally important if we want to be able to live our lives in a way that is pleasing to God, and if we want to come into our latter years declaring – confidently and courageously, like Caleb:

I wholly followed the Lord my God ... and lo, I am this day fourscore and five years old. As yet I am as strong this day as I was in the day that Moses sent me; as my strength was then, even so is my strength now ... NOW THEREFORE GIVE ME THIS MOUNTAIN...(Joshua 14: 8-12 KJV)