

Lessons from a Father

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Joshua 14:6-13 NIV

Now the men of Judah approached Joshua at Gilgal, and Caleb son of Jephunneh the Kenizzite said to him, “You know what the Lord said to Moses the man of God at Kadesh Barnea about you and me. I was forty years old when Moses the servant of the Lord sent me from Kadesh Barnea to explore the land. And I brought him back a report according to my convictions, but my brothers who went up with me made the hearts of the people melt with fear. I, however, followed the Lord my God wholeheartedly. So on that day Moses swore to me, ‘The land on which your feet have walked will be your inheritance and that of your children forever, because you have followed the Lord my God wholeheartedly.’”

“Now then, just as the Lord promised, he has kept me alive for forty-five years since the time he said this to Moses, while Israel moved about in the desert. So here I am today, eighty-five years old! I am still as strong today as the day Moses sent me out; I’m just as vigorous to go out to battle now as I was then. Now give me this hill country that the Lord promised me that day. You yourself heard then that the Anakites were there and their cities were large and fortified, but, the Lord helping me, I will drive them out just as he said.”

Then Joshua blessed Caleb son of Jephunneh and gave him Hebron as his inheritance. So Hebron has belonged to Caleb son of Jephunneh the Kenizzite ever since, because he followed the Lord, the God of Israel, wholeheartedly.

Moses had a problem. It wasn’t his first, and it wouldn’t be his last.

Pharaoh had given him plenty of trouble, always “hardening his heart” and refusing to let his Israelite slaves leave Egypt—then, after letting them go, changing his mind and sending his troops after them. As if that weren’t enough, once the Israelites got through the Red Sea *they* wanted to go back. There weren’t any McDonald’s or Wendy’s in this desert. “We’re dying of hunger,” they told Moses. “We might as well have died back in Egypt—at least we had burgers.”

Moses had dragged them, single-handedly it seemed, to Mount Sinai where they didn’t want to sit through the Lord’s big show—the sound was turned up too loud—and then squawked because Moses took too long to come back down and tell them how it had turned out. On top of that, Moses’ own sister and brother complained that his wife wasn’t their kind. Picky, picky.

Now, having reached Kadesh Barnea in the wilderness of Paran, Moses was ready to take the people into the land the Lord had promised them. That *was* the whole point of leaving Egypt, after all. And he needed some guys to sneak into Canaan and check it out, some trailblazers who would pave the way for them. That was his problem today—he needed some spies.

So he picked twelve guys that looked like leaders, one from each tribe. Their names read like a list of Bible characters—come to think of it, that’s what they were. The third guy on the list, from the tribe of Judah, was Caleb, whose dad had the funny name of Jephunneh. Caleb was forty at the time, heading right into the prime of life.

The spies left and the spies came back. “We’ve got good news, and we’ve got bad news.” The good news: the real estate is great. Nice dairy country, great for bee-keeping too, and producing crops that would win the blue ribbon at the county fair, hands down. Some pretty good-looking towns to boot. Now the bad news: there are some other folks there who think they own the place. They won’t sell, and they’re too big to fight.

That’s what most of the spies said. And it was déjà vu all over again. “Back to Egypt! If we’re just going to die, we might as well have died there.”

Yes, that’s what most of the spies said. All except two: a dude called Hoshea, or Josh for short—and another called Caleb. “Come on, you guys!” he said. “Don’t give up too soon. We can take that turf. Go for it!”

But they didn’t go for it. They chickened out. And that’s the last we hear of Caleb for a while. Oh, his name comes up three or four times. We find out he’ll be one of the guys that parcels out the real estate,

once the Israelites do get to Canaan. But mostly he keeps a low profile, like somebody who knows he's ahead of his time. What a career—starting at forty.

Camping over a weekend can be fun, especially if you have running water and a place to walk the dog. But forty years of it with all those animals and no showers can wear you out. It wore out all the Israelites. Even Moses was about ready to say “Sayonara” (in Hebrew) by the time it was over. But Caleb and Josh toughed it out.

Joshua, Moses' sidekick, got to lead the Israelites into their promised land. But he was well past retirement age, ready to pack it in. He did what he could, but there was still a lot of turf to take over.

Enter Caleb—again. “I'm just as fit as I was at forty, when I first saw this land,” he told Joshua. “God showed me, back then, that it would be mine some day. I may be 85, but I'm ready to claim it now!”

And claim it he did, evicting the squatters. He got the whole city of Hebron, where the Israelites' ancestors Abraham and Sarah were buried. And he got his land, more than he needed for himself. When his married daughter asked for it, he was able to give her some land with a good water supply. Caleb was a father who really took care his family. And he was one of the respected fathers of Israel, a man who never lost his vision for what God could do for his people. Eighty-five, but so what? The golf course? Forget it! The rocking chair? Give me a break! “I have a goal, I have a vision, I have God's promise!” That's Caleb for you.

What made Caleb tick? What was his secret?

The Bible doesn't tell us much about Caleb. It tells us a few things he did—spying out the land of Canaan, then 45 years later taking possession of his own part of it. We know he was from Judah, Israel's largest tribe and the tribe of David, ancestor of Jesus Christ. We know his father's name, and that he had a family. It was a close family—Caleb's daughter Achsah married his nephew Othniel, not an uncommon thing in those days.

But, most of all, the Bible tells us some of the things Caleb *said*. In many ways, what we *say* about our lives determines how we're going to live. Our words can shape our world. And a father's words can shape the destiny of his children. From Caleb's words, we learn some of the principles by which he lived as a follower of the Lord.

Yes, as a servant of *the Lord*. Behind everything Caleb said and did was that underlying loyalty to his God and Maker. He was a member of a community God had picked for a special task, to bless others by making him known to them. Abraham, their forefather, had received that commission (Genesis 12:1-3). And when the Israelites were faithful to what God had called them to do, his presence and his purpose were at the center of their lives.

But the God they served is the Lord of the entire universe. If the life style he approves works for Israel, it works for all people whether they believe in God or not. The principles for successful and accomplished living don't change with your religious affiliation. We trust every adult here has committed his life to God and, through Jesus, become one of his special people. But even if that hasn't happened for you quite yet, what Caleb has to say can still point you in a new direction—whether you're 18 or 48 or 80.

So let's look at what Caleb has to say.

Caleb's first recorded words come right after the spies return to Kadesh Barnea from their inspection trip to Canaan. They give this glowing report about the land, but also tell of the challenge that goes with the territory: dealing with those powerful folks who think it's theirs to keep. Most of the spies weren't too thrilled with that challenge, and the people of Israel get pretty upset about it, too.

To go, or not to go — that is the question. For Caleb, there can be only one answer. “We won't accomplish anything by sitting around. Let's get going, now! We're perfectly capable of meeting this challenge!” (see Numbers 13:30). Faced with a challenge, Caleb dared to *take the initiative*.

But Caleb was, literally, a voice crying in the wilderness. Most of the people fell far short of his confidence level. They were disgusted with Moses and ready to pick another leader to take them back to Egypt. Together with Joshua, Caleb tried to encourage them to stay the course and face down the landholders of Canaan. “The Lord is with *us*, not with *them*,” they said. “If we stick with God, he'll stick with us. And he *will* give us this land” (see Numbers 14:8-9).

Several things stand out about how these two men responded. Looking at the situation, they saw not their weakness but God's possibilities. They saw how the Lord would honor those who were faithful to him, while making their enemies vulnerable. They refused to be negative. Trusting in God, in other words, they *spoke the positive*. That's the role of a father — to encourage his loved ones to overcome life's difficulties, with the Lord's help.

Because the Israelites wouldn't buy what Caleb and Joshua had to say, Moses had to take them on a forty-year detour through the desert. By the time it was over, everyone with a negative attitude had died. Even Moses, with some problems of his own, didn't get to set foot in the promised land, but turned the wheel over to Joshua for the final haul.

Meanwhile, where's Caleb? The Bible doesn't say, but we can guess: slugging it out with the rest of his people in the hot desert sun, trying not to throw in their faces the poor choice they made back at Kadesh Barnea, grieving as family members and old friends pass away. But never losing the vision for what the Lord has for him and his family.

When we meet Caleb again, 45 years later, he's speaking not along with Joshua but *to* him. A lot of the promised land has been taken, but squatters are still living in the place reserved for Caleb's tribe. It's time to finish the job, and the Judeans are having a conference with Joshua about it. Caleb speaks up.

"When I was forty," he reminds them, "Moses sent us to look over that land. When we got back, the other guys said we couldn't take it. But I followed the Lord. And Moses told me I could have that land I walked on" (see Joshua 14:6-9).

What's Caleb saying here? Without bragging—it was, after all, on the record—he affirms that *he followed the Lord*. His buddies have followed their fears, but Caleb has followed the vision God had given him. He has followed it all the way, and he's never lost it. Because he followed the Lord, he will see the vision fulfilled.

Then he goes on. "And the Lord has kept me alive these 45 years, to see this day. I'm 85 and still kicking" (free translation, see Joshua 14:10).

Caleb could have said something else. He could have quoted his ancestor Jacob, who told Pharaoh, "Few and evil have been my days"—when he was 130 years old! (Genesis 47:9). He could have echoed the prayer of Moses, "The length of our days is seventy years—or eighty, if we have the strength; yet their span is but trouble and sorrow, for they quickly pass, and we fly away" (Psalm 90:11). He could have bemoaned his losses as loved ones died in the wilderness. He could have complained, "Nobody paid any attention to me back at Kadesh. They wanted to stone me! I got no respect." He could have said, "Nobody knows the trouble I've seen."

Instead he says, "The Lord has let me live!" In other words, Caleb has learned to *rejoice in the Lord's gift of life*.

Not only is Caleb alive, but he's alive and *well*. "I'm as strong now as I was when Moses sent me into Canaan. Everyday activities? No problem! And I can handle myself in a fight!" (see Joshua 14:11). We can just hear Caleb's great-grandsons boasting to their friends, "My great-granddad can beat up your great-granddad." What a joy for a father or a grandfather when even the little ones in the family want to boast about them! A father wants to give them something to boast about.

Through 45 years of wilderness wanderings and settlement in Canaan, Caleb had managed to *stay healthy and keep physically fit*. How did he do it? The Bible doesn't tell us what kept Caleb in such good shape. But it looks like an active life, a positive attitude and a sense of purpose had a lot to do with it. Plus the knowledge that he had obeyed God. His immune system wasn't compromised by a sense of guilt and unworthiness.

Now Caleb comes to the point. "Give me this land—this hill country with its fortified cities. It may well be that the Lord will be with me" (see Joshua 14:12). Yes, I'm healthy and fit, and I have a vision. But, more importantly, God will help me!

We can scheme for our future, and prepare for what lies ahead. But, as Solomon so wisely said, it's the Lord who gives the final report (Proverbs 16:1). Whatever we do, we do it *depending on the Lord's help*. In the last analysis, it all boils down to God. Caleb didn't forget that. As spiritual head of his family this father, Caleb, always reminded his loved ones who their real Father is, the God and Father of our Lord

Jesus Christ.

“The Lord will be with me,” he concluded, “and I will drive them out—just as he said” (see Joshua 14:13). It isn’t enough to be thankful for what God has done for you, or what you’ve done to be faithful to him in times past. Caleb doesn’t stop there; he looks ahead. He may be 85, but the story of his life isn’t over. He *plans for the future*. A wise father doesn’t just think about today — he looks ahead to the ongoing needs of his family. Sitting in your recliner watching the game, or taking off on a week-long fishing trip with your buddies, or wrapping yourself up in another favorite hobby might not be an investment in your family’s future. Some sacrifices may need to be made, and some effort mounted, to build that dream for our loved ones. Caleb, even at his advanced age, was prepared to move forward, taking action that would provide for the welfare of his own.

There we have it—Caleb’s seven-fold secret, expressed in his own words. *Take the initiative. Speak the positive. Follow the Lord. Rejoice in your life. Keep fit. Depend on God’s help. Plan for the future.*

These are principles of life in a world ordered by God. They work whether or not you get them from Caleb’s story, from someplace else in the Bible, or from another source.

How much time is left for you, dads, to put these principles into practice? As Solomon again observed, “There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven: a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot” (Ecclesiastes 3:1-2). Some of us guys are veteran dads, some of us are still in the thick of battle, and some of us belong to the F.F.A. —Future Fathers of America. But you don’t even have to be a guy to put Caleb’s principles into practice; to a degree, they work for all of us.

Each of us faces a different circumstance. You might be young, or you might be old. You might be a parent, or you might not. You might be in the pink of health, or you might face an illness or disability that limits you in some way. We don’t want to be flippant about it and try to claim Caleb’s principles are a blueprint for doing the impossible. But each of us can learn some kind of lesson from this father in Israel, Caleb the son of Jephunneh. Build on whichever of Caleb’s secrets apply to you: *Take the initiative. Speak the positive. Follow the Lord. Rejoice in your life. Keep fit. Depend on God’s help. Plan for the future.* Certainly, whatever our situation, we can all resolve to *follow the Lord and depend on his help*. And two out of seven isn’t bad.

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