

*“A Long Obedience in the Same Direction”

*with apologies to Eugene Peterson

Joshua 14-15

May 11, 2003

Dr. Jerry Nelson

Who are your heroes?

My son flashes his “light-saber” and tells me he wants to be a Jedi knight.

I keep telling him there’s not a lot of future in that business but thus far he’s undeterred by my pragmatism.

I suspect the days are coming when the Michael Jordan’s and Tiger Woods of his youth will be his heroes.

The young seem especially attracted to fame or fortune and pick their heroes accordingly.

But hopefully we mature beyond that and look for real heroes where character is the attraction, not just celebrity.

I have found such a hero and I hope he will be as attractive to you as he is to me.

As a Christian I am at least impressed with, if not always fully understanding of, Jesus’ response to the question, “What is the greatest commandment?”

Matthew 22:37-38 “Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment.”

Jesus didn’t just make that up while he was here on earth.

He was reiterating what God has always called his people to:

That same standard was written 1500 years earlier in Deuteronomy 10:13 “To love the LORD your God and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul...”

What does he mean?

Quite obviously he’s describing a degree of devotion, dedication, or commitment that far exceeds a casual relationship or a token allegiance.

A token allegiance is like mine to my home state of Wisconsin. The extent of my devotion is that I take a little pride in being from there and I secretly delight when the Green Bay Packers beat the Denver Broncos. It isn't like I pay taxes there or that I'd want to live there.

The hero I introduce to you today does not have a **token** allegiance but a **total** allegiance to God.

I stand in awe of the **trust** and **obedience** that mark his commitment.

Our hero is first introduced to us way back in the book of Numbers after Moses led the people of Israel out of Egypt.

400 years before that event, God had promised Israel's forefather, Abraham, that a day was coming when his descendants would inherit the land of Canaan – present day Israel or Palestine.

As this huge group of people marched from Egypt toward Canaan, Moses assigned a reconnaissance team to spy out the territory they were supposed to invade and inhabit.

Among those assigned to this task was our hero.

Numbers 13:17-14:10 (condensed)

"When Moses sent them to explore Canaan, he said, "Go up through the (desert) and on into the hill country. See what the land is like and whether the people who live there are strong or weak, few or many. What kind of land do they live in? Is it good or bad? What kind of towns do they live in? Are they unwalled or fortified? How is the soil? Is it fertile or poor? Are there trees in it or not? Do your best to bring back some of the fruit of the land."

So they went up and explored the land... When they reached the Valley of Eshcol, they cut off a branch bearing a single cluster of grapes. Two of them carried it on a pole between them, along with some pomegranates and figs... At the end of forty days they returned from exploring the land.

They came back to Moses and Aaron and the whole Israelite community at Kadesh... There they reported to them and to the

whole assembly and showed them the fruit of the land. They gave Moses this account: "We went into the land to which you sent us, and it does flow with milk and honey! Here is its fruit. But the people who live there are powerful and the cities are fortified and very large. We even saw descendants of Anak (giants) there..."

Then Caleb silenced the people before Moses and said, "We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it." But the men who had gone up with him said, "We can't attack those people; they are stronger than we are... All the people we saw there are of great size... We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them."

That night all the people of the community raised their voices and...grumbled against Moses and Aaron, and...said to them, "If only we had died in Egypt! Or in this desert! Why is the LORD bringing us to this land only to let us fall by the sword? Our wives and children will be taken as plunder. Wouldn't it be better for us to go back to Egypt?" And they said to each other, "We should choose a leader and go back to Egypt."

(But Joshua and Caleb) said, "The land we passed through and explored is exceedingly good. If the LORD is pleased with us, he will lead us into that land, a land flowing with milk and honey, and will give it to us. Only do not rebel against the LORD. And do not be afraid of the people of the land, because we will swallow them up. Their protection is gone, but the LORD is with us. Do not be afraid of them." But the whole assembly talked about stoning them.

(Then the Lord said), "Nevertheless, as surely as I live...not one of the men who saw my glory and the miraculous signs I performed in Egypt... will ever see the land I promised... But because my servant Caleb has a different spirit and follows me wholeheartedly, I will bring him into the land he went to, and his descendants will inherit it."

The hero I introduce to you today is this man, **Caleb**.

And remember real heroes are not about celebrity but character.

- Celebrities are known for being known.
- Heroes are known for who they really are.

I wanted you to have this background information, to which we will return later, but our text for today is in Joshua 14 and 15.

We have been intermittently studying the book of Joshua since last October and will complete our study in the next four weeks. And it is in Joshua 14 where we see the distinctive nature of Caleb's character.

Three times the text will point out the quality in this man that makes him a hero, someone to be emulated.

Now before we read it, I want you to remember that this is written about a time 45 years later than the event we read about earlier.

By this time Moses has died, Joshua is the new leader and the army of Israel has recently invaded and taken over Canaan.

Like the current war in Iraq, the major fighting was over but "mop-up" actions were still going on and reorganization of the country was necessary.

Specifically, the land was now to be apportioned to the descendants of the 12 sons of Jacob.

One of those groups is called Judah, named after their forefather, one of those 12 sons.

It is at that point that we pick up the story of Caleb.

And again, I want you to listen for the significant character trait of this hero.

Joshua 14:6-15 "Now the men of Judah approached Joshua at Gilgal, and Caleb..., "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.

Three times you heard the same thing repeated to note and emphasize Caleb's character and the central point of the story:

Joshua 14:8 Caleb said, "I, however, followed the LORD my God **wholeheartedly**.

Joshua 14:9 Moses said, "you have followed the LORD my God **wholeheartedly**."

Joshua 14:14 Joshua said, "he followed the LORD, the God of Israel, **wholeheartedly**."

Here is a man who has lived out what the Lord calls the greatest commandment – **with his whole heart he has loved the Lord**.

You might say, "Wait a minute, it doesn't say that he loved the Lord, it says that he 'followed' the Lord."

You are right but Jesus continually makes the point that is made throughout the Bible, John 14:23 "If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching."

For loving is not mere sentimentality; loving is following and obeying and doing so out of desire not duty.

It is this "following wholeheartedly" that I want to explore with you today.

It is this "wholehearted following" that I want to characterize my life and yours.

Sometime prior to our hearing of him in Numbers 14, Caleb had placed his faith in God.

Was it as a child? Was it as a young man?

He was undoubtedly reared in a religious home.

He knew all about God.
 He'd heard the stories of Adam, Noah and Abraham and his
 great, great, great grandfather Jacob.

But somewhere along the way it changed from religion to relationship.
 Caleb was called to trust God.
 He was not just called to trust the teaching of God but the
 God of those teachings.
 It was person to person, Caleb and God.

Author David Watson reminds us that the same is to be true of our
 relationship with God today:

“When Buddha was dying, his disciples asked how they could
 best remember him. He told them not to bother; it was his
 teaching not his person that counted. With Jesus it was
 altogether different. Everything centers around him, his
 person.” (Watson Called and Committed 8-9)

That is why Jesus' disciples were so shattered when he was
 executed.

They still had his teachings but they wanted him.
 And **that** is what changed their lives when he rose from
 the dead – they had him.
 And **that** is what energized them after Jesus
 ascension to heaven when the Holy Spirit came on
 them – He was Christ, with them.

Somewhere along the way Caleb placed his trust in God.

I wonder how Caleb got to that place?
 How did Caleb get from thinking of God as a religious idea to
 having a relationship with him?
 Did he ever wonder if God was real? Have you?

When I wrestled with the reality of God in young adulthood and even
 now in my moments of doubt about the reality of God, I go back to
 what for me are the essentials:

Something has to explain the existence of beauty and virtue as much as something must explain ugliness and sin.

I can't fit famine, child abuse, cruelty, Stalin, Hitler, and Idi Amin into any scheme that makes sense and when I fixate on that I'm tempted to assume there is no God – that life is random.

Where does such evil come from?

But neither can I fit into any scheme that makes sense:

- a child's delight in a rainbow,
- the majesty of a snow covered mountain,
- the sheer beauty of the morning sun glistening from the winter frost of a million tiny branches,
- the deep seated joy I experience with my family seated around the fire just talking about nothing.

Where does such beauty and joy come from?

Again, something has to make sense of all this – it defies logic to assume it is all chance, all random, all the outcome of eternal, impersonal, evolutionary forces – and it certainly runs counter to an intuition that demands that something make sense of life.

I started with the Bible but not the Bible as God's Word – but just the Bible as a credible record of very important history.

Again, something has to account for 2000 years of Christianity.

Something has to account for the fact that the entire world marks time (B.C./ A.D.) by the birth of one man – Jesus.

And as I look at the record of that man, one event stands out as critical to my search for a reality that makes sense of life:

Jesus death and especially his resurrection.

Unless I decide, before looking at the evidence, that a resurrection is impossible, I must reasonably conclude that he did in fact die and three days later rose from the dead.

If that is true (and the evidence supports that conclusion) then this man was as unique as he claimed to be.

And he claimed to be God who came to earth as a human.

At that point I have a question to answer – Will I accept the record?

And I have a decision to make – Will I believe him?

It is reasonable to believe him.

And even as I choose to believe him, he, in that very experience going ahead of me, gives me faith to believe, to put my trust in him.

He is God, he makes sense of the beauty and virtue I see and experience in life – it comes from his hand.

He is God, he enables me to trust him with the ugliness and evil I see and experience in life – his hand controls it.

That is a “world view”, a view of the world and of life and death and virtue and evil that revolves around who he is.

I believe him.

I trust him.

I bet my life on him.

I stake my eternal future on him.

That’s what Caleb did.

Without nearly as much evidence as I have today, Caleb bet his life on God.

But what did that mean in practice?

Saying I am a God-follower, a Christ-follower, a Christian is one thing, but being a God-follower is quite another.

Of Caleb, God says he “WHOLEHEARTEDLY followed the Lord”.

That’s what I want for you and me.

At 40 years of age Caleb’s trust in God was put to the test, but not for the first time.

I say not for the first time, because Caleb must have had some questioning thoughts about following Moses out of the security of Egypt and into the unknown desert of the Sinai Peninsula.

He must have had some twinges of doubt when the Red Sea blocked their escape in front and the Egyptian army was approaching from behind.

But there he was at 40 years of age with eleven others, sent out by Moses to reconnoiter the land of Canaan.

He saw the fertile land that the others saw.

He saw the hills and valleys, the potential for the future that they saw.

But he also saw the walled cities and evidences of the armies that they saw.

And with them he must have felt what they felt when they reported about the number and size of the inhabitants of the land.

Here's what the others said: Numbers 13:28,31,33 "But the people who live there are powerful and the cities are fortified and very large. We even saw descendants of Anak (giants) there... We can't attack those people; they are stronger than we are... All the people we saw there are of great size... We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them."

God had told them to go and take the land.

So now, along with the others, Caleb's faith was on the line.

What did he trust more, his own perception or his God?

This is where authentic faith is separated from the appearance of faith.

This is where the reality of a relationship with God is separated from the façade of a relationship.

Caleb said, Joshua 14:7 "I brought...back a report according to my convictions."

And what were those convictions?

Numbers 13:30, 14:9: "Then Caleb silenced the people before Moses and said, "We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it... And do not be afraid of the people of the land, because we will swallow them up. Their protection is gone, but the LORD is with us. Do not be afraid of them."

Caleb trusted his God more than he trusted his own eyes.

Though he could not see God he believed God was there, that God was good and that God's will could not be thwarted.

That is wholehearted following.

I have shared with you before the tremendous spiritual struggle I had in the first years of my son's life before we adopted him -

The time when I didn't know if God's will would be to keep him safe or to allow him to be sent into an insecure, unloved and likely abusive, even life-threatening environment.

I begged God to keep him safe.

But knowing from experience that not everything I hoped for or begged for would be granted, I was afraid God might allow the child to be taken from us and into that environment.

And the truth was that I didn't trust God to bring good out of that, if it happened.

I drew back in unbelief, in an unwillingness to go there trusting God.

I realized then what "wholehearted following" is and is not. In his mercy God didn't force me to go there.

I think I know something of what Caleb was up against in his own soul when he saw what the others saw, but Caleb didn't draw back in unbelief.

Caleb looked at those walls, those soldiers, and those circumstances and believed his God more than he believed his own eyes and logic – he "wholeheartedly trusted his God!"

Wayne and Amy Losey and their four daughters have spent the last few weeks in Germany, having left the very-dangerous-to-Americans central Asian country where they serve as our missionaries.

As the war in Iraq wound down, they had to make a decision about going back to that country they had fled only weeks before.

The strongly anti-American, anti-Christian sentiment in the country makes it foolhardy for them to go except for one reason – God has called them to that place.

As I understand it, they wrestled with whether to go back or not.
 And certainly in that wrestling was the issue of God's will for them and then their trust of Him, if his will was for them to go back.

What if their home was attacked?
 What if harm came to those precious little girls?

They chose to go.
 Why?

Because God has called them there
 And because they trust their God wholeheartedly
 they can obey him wholeheartedly.

Jesus really raised the stakes on this issue when many times in the NT he spoke of our trust of him and commitment to him relative to anyone or anything else.

Matthew 10:37-39 "Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; ³⁸ and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me.

Author Darrell Bock has written:

"For many, Christianity is merely a guaranteed ticket to heaven... But discipleship means being a follower. It means our attention is turned to how we can follow Jesus, not how we can make him follow us. This means that we are seeking his kingdom, not our own... Everything in our culture from commercials to our education pushes us in the direction of advancing our standing of living for more comfort. To pick up a cross means walking against the grain of cultural values, so that our own expectations and needs take a back seat to God's call. Some things we may have seen as ours by natural right may need to be renounced because they are subtle forms of idolatry. The Spirit guides us into seeing things differently than we did before. Bearing a cross may mean leaving behind dreams created for us long ago by a citizenship we have now left behind. So discipleship requires a renewal of the mind and a commitment of the heart... It will mean intense involvement with

God's Word and with other believers who are dedicated to growing in their faith. A disciple is never (static; he/she is either growing or atrophying)... So discipleship is a full-time job, not a weekend hobby. As a lifestyle and commitment, it never takes a holiday. That is why Jesus says we should bear our cross daily." (Darrell Bock in NIV Application

Commentary Luke 268-9)

Caleb followed the Lord WHOLEHEARTEDLY.

He was not claiming perfection, only that he put God first.

For example, if a man is wholeheartedly devoted to his business it doesn't mean he never does anything but business but that when other things conflict with business, business wins.

It doesn't mean he never spends time in recreation but it is re-creation, a respite, enabling him to be better at his business.

And following the Lord wholeheartedly doesn't mean you don't think; it means you DO think and you think carefully and you weigh all the evidence and you come down on the side of trusting God more than you trust intuition, reason, or any other influence.

Caleb was not lukewarm, he didn't try to straddle two worlds.

You see we either trust God or we don't.

One man wrote that when Jesus calls us "to a life of total and uncompromising obedience, we should not be surprised if we are strongly tempted to qualify His call, to modify its stringent demands by taking a more "reasonable" approach... We may try to hold a more "balanced" view and reinterpret the teaching of Jesus... It is important, we say, not to take things too literally. We must not become legalistic... Jesus may have SAID, "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth"; but what he MEANT was, "Enjoy the beautiful things in this world, but do not allow them to hold a central place in your hearts." Jesus may have SAID, "Love your enemies"; but what he MEANT was, "Do not take active revenge against someone who has wronged you." When Jesus SAID, "Seek first the kingdom of God," what he really MEANT was, "Although there will be many other things you must seek in order to exist and have a normal life, make sure that you do not leave God's kingdom out of your life

altogether.” In these ways we evade the clear call of Jesus to (wholehearted) obedience; in this our whole attitude toward him is wrong. We do not believe that he loves us and plans only for what is best for us.” (David Watson in *Called and Committed* 178)

But talk about a hero; Caleb trusted his God fully.

His relationship to his God was the biggest thing, the most important thing about him.

Lastly I want you to notice this was a wholeheartedness that remained true of him the rest of his life.

Caleb didn't retire from active service and he didn't retire from wholehearted following.

Caleb was 85 when he stood before Joshua and said, I want to take on the hardest job in the land – I want to rout out the giant Anakim, the very ones who intimidated our people 45 years earlier.

Joshua 14: 10-12 “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.”

Robert Browning:

“Grow old along with me – the best is yet to be –
The last of life, for which the first was made.
Our times are in His hand, Who said,
“A whole I planned.” Youth sees but half;
Trust God; see all; nor be afraid.”

Kant wrote several of his greatest works after he was 74.

Handel produced many of his masterpieces after he was 70.

Oliver Wendell Holmes was Chief Justice in his 80s.

Goethe completed *Faust* at 80.

Tennyson wrote “The Crossing of the Bar” at 83.

Titian painted his historic *Battle of Lepanto* at 93.

Don't lay your armor down until God calls you from the battle.

God calls us to wholeheartedly follow the Lord!

The obstacles of life loom large.

But our God is larger!

Will we trust him?

Will we trust that he is **there**, that he is **good** and that he **will** accomplish his good purposes in our lives?