



A MAN TO MATCH THE MOUNTAIN

Old men ought to be explorers

—T. S. Eliot

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Joshua 14:6-15

David H. Roper

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Children love stories. When our boys were small and we would tuck them in bed at night, they would always ask us to tell them a story. I'm happy to say our grandchildren are carrying on the tradition: "Papa," they say, "tell me a story."

Even grown-up children love stories. Stories teach and touch our hearts in ways that facts do not. They teach, and the lessons are memorable. The best of all stories are those God tells in the Bible—what John Milton called "the stories of men and women preserved and stored up in a Book...treasured up on purpose to a life beyond life." They're all about how God takes ordinary people, turns them into men and women of strength and dignity and utilizes them to bring salvation to the world.

One of my favorites is the story of Caleb, Israel's legendary crusty, feisty old warrior. I call him, with apologies to Irving Stone, *A Man to Match the Mountain*.

The beginning of the story

We first meet Caleb at Kadesh, Israel's staging point for their long-awaited campaign against the Canaanites. There, they made a fatal mistake: they sent spies into the land to gather intelligence.

It's true the impulse seems to have come from God, but that was his concession to their unbelief. Forty years later Moses would say,

"All of you came to me and said, 'Let us send men ahead to spy out the land for us and bring back a report about the route we are to take and the towns we will come to'" (Deuteronomy 1:22, NIV).

God had promised to give them the land. He knew Canaan. Why did they need to gather intelligence? Why were they so anxious to make their own assessment? Couldn't they trust God's judgment?

It was the wrong thing to do but, God always gives us the right to be wrong. He said to Moses,

"Send some men to explore the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the Israelites. From each ancestral tribe send one of its leaders" (Numbers 13:2).

Moses then selected twelve brave men. Their names are supplied in the verses that follow (13:4-16), but of the twelve only two are memorable: Hoshea (whom Moses renamed Joshua) and Caleb, Joshua's sidekick and comrade-in-arms. All the rest were quickly forgotten.

What's in a name?

Caleb was an interesting fellow. First off, his name means, "dog"—a nickname, most likely. (It's unlikely that parents would saddle their kid with a name like that.) Dogs back then were wild, feral creatures noted more for their ferocity than for being man's best friend. Caleb's name suggests that, at least in one point of his life, he was as mean as a junkyard dog.

The other thing about Caleb is that he was not an Israelite. He was a Kenizzite. The Kenizzites were a wild, nomadic Bedouin tribe that ranged throughout the Sinai and southern Palestine. Caleb was a Gentile, an outsider who, by God's love, had been brought in from the cold.

The expedition

Moses sent out twelve spies with these instructions:

"Go up through the Negev 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 on it or not? Do your best to bring back some of the fruit of the land" (Numbers 13:17-20).

The spies explored the land from the Wilderness of Zin in the south to Rehob, at Lebo-hamath, 250 miles to the north. They discovered that Canaan was indeed, as God had said, a land flowing with milk and honey.

But the Canaanites were there, their cities were strongly fortified, and the Anakites were there, the Titans of Mount Hebron whose stature and strength were legendary.

The spies spent forty days reconnoitering Canaan, at the end of which they returned to Israel's encampment and made their report:

"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 there. The Amalekites live in the Negev; the Hittites, Jebusites and Amorites live in the hill country; and the Canaanites live near the sea and along the Jordan" (Numbers 13:27-29).

Up to this point all twelve spies were in perfect agreement. This was an accurate portrayal of the situation. In the face of it, Caleb added his word:

"We should by all means go up for we can surely overcome it" (13:30).

Then the ten said,

"We can't attack those people; they are stronger than we are...The land we explored devours those living in it. All the people we saw there are of great size. We saw the Nephilim there (the descendants of Anak come from the Nephilim). We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them" (Numbers 13:31-33).

The people sided with the ten and mutinied:

"That night all the people of the community raised their voices and wept aloud. All the Israelites grumbled against Moses and Aaron, and the whole assembly 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?" (Numbers 14:1-3).

Moses and Aaron fell on their faces, but Caleb (along with Joshua) rose to the occasion:

"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" (Numbers 13:31-4:9).

The big difference

There's a lot of talk in this chapter about giant people and impossible places. All twelve of the spies had seen the strength of the Canaanites and the size of their walled cities, but Caleb and Joshua had a different way of looking at them. The ten said: "We can't attack those people; they are stronger than we are." The two said, "We can do it!"

We can't! We can! All the difference in the world.

What made the difference? It lay in this: the ten compared the giants with *themselves* and the giants loomed large; the two compared the giants with *God* and the giants were cut down to size. "The *Lord* is with us," they said. "We have no reason to be afraid!"

Unbelief never gets beyond the difficulties—the impregnable cities and the impossible giants. It is preoccupied with them—brooding over them, pitting them against human resources.

Faith, on the other hand, though it never minimizes the dangers and difficulties of life, looks away from them to God and counts on his invisible presence. "The Lord is with us," Caleb insisted, "Do not be afraid of the giants."

The book of Hebrews echoes the same sentiment: "God has said, 'I will never leave you; I will never forsake you.' So we say with confidence, 'The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?'" (Hebrews 13:5-6).

What are your "giants"?

- A habit you cannot break?
- A temptation you cannot resist?
- A difficult marriage from which there is no escape?
- A drug abusing teenager for whom there are no answers?

If we compare ourselves with our difficulties, we will always be overwhelmed. But if we compare them with God, there is nothing we cannot do. Faith looks away from the greatness of the undertaking to the greatness of our ever-present, all-powerful God. As the poem puts it,

*Got any rivers you think are uncrossable?
Got any mountains you can't tunnel through?
God specializes in things thought impossible;
And He can do what no other power can do.*

We can't; he can. Therefore, we can. We can't, then, becomes blasphemy. "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me!"

The promise

Despite Caleb's counsel of faith the people picked up stones to stone him. God, however, intervened. In wrath

he swore to himself that not one of that generation would enter the land. The writer of Hebrews concludes, "We see that they could not enter in because of unbelief" (Hebrews 3:19).

But there were two notable exceptions: Joshua, the son of Nun and Caleb, the son of Jephunneh.

"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" (14:24).

The vow and its exception is repeated later:

"Because they [the Israelites] have not followed me wholeheartedly, not one of the men twenty years old or more who came up out of Egypt will see the land I promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—not one except Caleb son of Jephunneh the Kenizzite and Joshua son of Nun, for they followed the Lord wholeheartedly" (Numbers 32:10-12).

The spies who brought the discouraging word died in the wilderness, but "Joshua son of Nun and Caleb son of Jephunneh survived" (14:38).

For forty years Caleb waited while that generation died off. For forty years he counted the days, counting on the promise, waiting for his chance. Like Milton's Abdiel: "Faithful among the faithless, only faithful he."

Caleb's inheritance (Joshua 14:6-15)

Forty-five years later, Caleb got his chance. For forty years Caleb waited while that generation died. For five years he fought valiantly at Joshua's side. The back of the Canaanite resistance now had been broken, but there were still large tracts of the land to be claimed.

All Israel gathered at Gilgal to determine which tribes would secure those unconquered regions, but before the first lot was drawn, Caleb stepped forward to claim his piece of ground:

"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 sink. 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 for ever, 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. (Hebron used to be called Kirjath Arba after Arba, who was the greatest man among

the Anakites.)

Then the land had rest from war (Joshua 14:6-15).

We can infer from Caleb's speech that the spies did not travel together, but were distributed individually throughout Canaan, each one searching a particular portion of the land. Caleb's portion was Hebron, the haunt of the dreadful Anakim.

If this is true it gives a special flair and audacity to Caleb's faith. He had personally reconnoitered Hebron, the habitat of the giants, and had seen them in their setting, and yet was undeterred.

It also gives special meaning to the land-grant made to him by Moses: "On that day," he said, "Moses swore to me, 'The land *on which your feet have walked* will be your inheritance and that of your children for ever'" (Joshua 14:9). This was a promise that by God's grace he would take the high ground his feet had trod.

Caleb was given no soft spot in which to retire, but the hard place where the fierce and terrible Anakim dwelled. When most men would have sought retirement, Caleb kept on truckin'.

We ask, "What made this old veteran so aggressive and young at heart? Most people don't just get older. They get out-dated and obsolete. What kept Caleb on the cutting edge?"

Three times in Numbers, three times in Joshua we're told, "He followed the Lord, the God of Israel, wholeheartedly."

He wholly followed the Lord

To "follow the Lord wholeheartedly" is to be his disciple. Jesus' invitation has always been "Follow me. Let me disciple you.

"Following Jesus means walking with him, worshipping him, practicing his presence, loving him, sitting at his feet, listening to him, "trying to learn what is pleasing to [him]," as Paul would say.

When you take this matter of discipleship seriously, something happens to your character. You become a different kind of person. You begin to look at things the way the Lord looks at them. You begin to respond to the stresses and strains of life with the same poise that he had.

There is a difference between simply being right and being good, or beautiful, as the term is used in the New Testament. Paul talks about "adorning the gospel." There is a rightness that is uptightness that is not at all attractive. But there is a winsomeness about someone who follows the Lord and allows him to change one's life.

Augustine said, "There is no virtue without a miracle." True virtue comes as the Lord begins to rub off on us. If you spend a lot of time around a strong character, after a while you begin to reflect his character traits. You are not even conscious of it at times, but you begin to act and think like him. This is what happens to us as we follow the Lord. He will change us so that wherever we go we will have an impact upon people. Paul describes this as the "aroma of Christ."

What we are

As I get older I am more and more impressed that what we are is far more important than anything we do. The apostle Peter describes how to have an impact on the world, in these words from his letter: "make every effort to

supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. For if these things are yours and abound, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 1:8-11).

Even if we don't do a thing, what we are communicates to others. When we are what we ought to be, then God can do with us what he has planned from eternity to do with us. What we are is what matters; what we do is God's business. It's up to him to get us to the right place at the right time to say the right thing to the right person. Our business is to focus on Christ: to love him, worship him, adore him, listen to him, learn from him and let him change us. Then God can put us to our intended purpose.

Henri Nouwen asked Mother Teresa once what he had to do to be more relevant and effective in his service to the Lord. His ministry was in disarray, and he was depressed about it. She said to him, "Henri, spend one hour a day in devotion to Christ and you'll be all right." There is an enormous amount of truth in that statement.

Staying in the action

When we follow our Lord in that way we don't have to worry about being relevant, *avante-garde*, and on the cutting edge. We don't have to look for challenges or make things happen. He will make us useful.

Our usefulness is God's business, not ours. He doesn't ask us to originate, initiate, make far-reaching plans or execute them, but rather to follow him. That's when things get exciting. You never know what he will do next. Joaquin Andujar, pitcher for the St. Louis Cardinals, said you could sum up baseball in one word: "You never know." His word count was off, but he captured the essence of baseball and of God. The only thing predictable about God is that he is utterly unpredictable. Surprise and serendipity are always on his mind. When God is at work you can reckon on the unforeseen.

Life gets exciting when we follow the Lord in this way. He takes us where others have never gone before and where we've never thought we could go. He leads us beyond anything we could ever ask or think, beyond our wildest dreams.

There was that day that Jesus said to his disciples, "Let's go over to the other side."

There they encountered the demonized Gerasene whom Jesus delivered from the Legion (Mark 5:1-20). You know the story: how the man pled to be delivered from his terrible conglomeration of evil spirits; how Jesus exorcised the demons and cast them into a herd of nearby swine.

The man, emancipated, asked to accompany Jesus but was told: "Go home to your family and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you." So the man went away and began to tell in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him."

Turned loose on an unsuspecting population he went throughout the region celebrating his cure and turning the countryside upside-down. When Jesus returned to that region, many sought to be saved. Whole cities were renewed by the witness of one reclaimed soul.

Take Paul for example: "I'm going to Jerusalem not knowing what will happen to me there."

“Compelled by the Spirit,” he went off Jerusalem and touched off a riot that took him to Caesarea and then to Rome for trial. While under house arrest there, Paul was chained to members of Caesar’s Praetorian Guard, the choice young men of the empire who, after serving in the palace guard, became members of the Roman aristocracy. They were the mind-movers and king-makers of the empire.

These fine young men were with the apostle in four-hour shifts, looking over his shoulder as he penned his epistles, listening as he boldly “preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 28:31).

Paul’s pregnant greeting to Philippi from “those of Caesar’s household” (4:22), suggests that some of these young men had become members of the household of faith and were taking the gospel back to the barracks. Though confined, Paul was moving the heart of the Roman Empire. “I want you to know,” Paul wrote, “that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel” (Philippians 1:12). Who could have premeditated or planned such a course?

The world has yet to see what God will do through you and me. Our task is pray and wait and see what that will be. God will not allow you to waste your life. He will tell you what to do and he will see to it that you bear fruit for him.

Carpe diem

“*Carpe diem*,” we say nowadays: “seize the day.” The saying has become so popular and proverbial that most people are surprised when they learn that the phrase has been around for a long time. It originated with the Latin poet, Horace:

*Cut back long hopes. Even as we speak, envious time
Flees: seize the day, trust little in tomorrow.*

Horace was advising his young friend not to run out and try to conquer the world, but to do the small but truly significant things that need to be done every day—the “duty of the present moment.”

The way to seize the day is to do the duty of the present moment. If we focus on *being* what God wants us to be, he will take care of the rest.

Growing old

It’s especially important to remember this truth as we grow older. We tend to lose heart as we age. Our physical strength abates; our health deteriorates; our minds get fuzzy; our memories fade. But we need not lose heart. “Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day” (2 Corinthians 4:16).

The drain of the years is amply met by the spring of God’s grace that flows within. There is no reason why we should decline in usefulness as we age. As F. B. Meyer said with his Old World charm, “The last sheaves that fall beneath thy sickle shall be the heaviest; the width of thy swath shall be the greatest as you turn toward home.”

Getting older doesn’t necessarily mean getting obsolete. It can mean growing, maturing, serving, ministering, venturing, enjoying ourselves to the end of our days. There is still service to be rendered and there are victories to be won. “Have a blast while you last,” as a friend of mine says.

There was no stagnation with Caleb. He stayed in contention until the end: From “Hebron Caleb drove out the three Anakites—Sheshai, Ahiman and Talmi—descendants of Anak” (Joshua 15:14)—the gigantic men of whom the proverb was written, “Who can stand up against the Anakites?” (Deuteronomy 9:2).

Caleb did. He thrashed the giants and drove them from the summit. He did what the rest of Israel could and should have done. He did it at age 85 because “he wholly followed the Lord.”

A footnote

Hebron is not the end of the story. From there Caleb soldiered on...

[Caleb] marched against the people living in Debir (formerly called Kiriath Sepher). And Caleb said, “I will give my daughter Acsah in marriage to the man who attacks and captures Kiriath Sepher.” Othniel son of Kenaz, Caleb’s brother, took it; so Caleb gave his daughter Acsah to him in marriage.

One day when she came to Othniel, she urged him to ask her father for a field. When she got off her donkey, Caleb asked her, “What can I do for you?” She replied, “Do me a special favor. Since you have given me land in the Negev, give me also springs of water.” So Caleb gave her the upper and lower springs (Joshua 15:15-19).

Debir, we’re told, was originally called *Kiriath Sepher*, the “City of Books,” so called because it was a depository of the books and learning of the Anakim, the center of that degraded and dangerous culture.

Debir had been conquered once before but had fallen again into Canaanite hands (cf. Joshua 10:39). Caleb was determined to wrest it once for all from their control.

He did not himself engage in the struggle; he rather stirred up his little brother: It was “Othniel son of Kenaz, Caleb’s brother, (who) took it” (Joshua 15:17).

Othniel became the first “judge” of Israel—a brave champion who saved Israel from Cushan-Rishathaim, the king of Aram (Judges 3:9-10). It was Caleb’s faith that moved Othniel to be the man that God intended him to be.

No one ever outlives their usefulness. Even when “old and gray,” as the psalmist said, we can declare “God’s power to the next generation, his might to all who are to come” (Psalm 71:18).

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