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Joshua #12

Sermon Summary #12

The Supremacy of God, Caleb, and Grasshoppers!

Joshua 14:6-15

[Note: In the middle of chapter 10, following the defeat of the confederation of kings at Gibeon, there is an **abrupt shift** from narrative to a tedious and often repetitive recitation of the names of the cities and kings that Joshua conquered. There is also a seemingly endless listing of the names of the people of Israel together with a description of the geographical location and boundaries of their inheritance in the promised land. This continues through chapter 21. Thus our focus from this point on will be understandably selective.]

Everything I say today is grounded in one central and all consuming truth. It is simply this: ***How you perceive and think about God will inform and shape how you perceive and think about everything else.***

It's important for you to understand that in our world today it's precisely the other way around. I'm going to argue that *your concept of God* will govern how you think about the political scene, interpersonal relationships, suffering and hardship, marriage, sex, the economy, and everything else that makes up your individual and corporate life on this earth.

In the world today, this has been inverted or reversed. It has been turned on its head. ***People today don't interpret their world and their experience in the light of who God is, but they allow their world and their experience to interpret who God is allowed to be.*** Here's what they do. They hold in hand their many and varied experiences in life, whether they be financial or sexual or athletic or intellectual, all of their relationships and dreams and hopes and fears, and then from that draw conclusions on who God is allowed to be and what kind of God he is.

Ask yourself this question: How often do I experience either success or failure, pleasure or pain, hope or despair, joy or frustration, and then from that draw conclusions about who God is, what kind of God he is, and whether or not he can be trusted or believed? To put it as simply as I can, *we invest in our circumstances the power and authority to dictate who God is allowed to be. We see him in light of them, rather than the reverse.*

Let me give you some specific examples of what I have in mind.

When you hear news of international conflict and war and various nations threatening one another or reports of the ever-increasing stockpile of nuclear weapons, do you panic or cower in fear or wonder if God has lost his grip on the affairs of man? Or do you reassure your heart with a reminder from Isaiah 40,

“Behold, the nations are like a drop from a bucket, and are accounted as the dust on the scales; . . . All the nations are as nothing before him, they are accounted by him as less than nothing and emptiness. . . . Do you not know? Do you not hear? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth? It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers; who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to dwell in; who brings princes to nothing, and makes the rulers of the earth as emptiness. Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown, scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth, when he blows on them, and they wither, and the tempest carries them off like stubble (**Isaiah 40:15, 17, 21-24**).

When people join forces to oppose you and make baseless accusations against you and threaten to undermine all your efforts and make of you a laughingstock in society, does God shrink in your estimation, or do you remind yourself of Paul’s words in Romans 8,

“What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us (**Romans 8:31-34**).

Or when the angry atheists of our generation write their best-selling books and mock everything you hold dear and insist that your so-called “God” is little more than the projection onto the universe of your own fears and self-doubts, do you reassure your heart with the words from Psalm 2,

“He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision. Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury, saying, ‘As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill.’ I will tell of the decree: The LORD said to me, ‘You are my Son; today I have begotten you. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel.’ Now therefore, O kings, be wise; be warned, O rulers of the earth. Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all who take refuge in him” (**Psalm 2:4-12**).

If you are wondering why I have taken this approach today at the beginning of our study of Joshua 14, it is simply because ***I want you to see in Caleb a man who refused to let circumstances and disappointments give shape to his concept of God.*** Caleb was not a man who reasoned from the bottom up, as if life and its mysteries and struggles determine who God is. Rather, ***he was a man who reasoned from the top down. He was a man who saw everything in life in the light of who God is.*** And there is much we can learn from him.

Before we begin, we need to take note of how Caleb is described in Joshua 14:6. There he is said to be “the son of Jephunneh the Kenizzite.” If you’ve been paying attention you may recall that a non-Israelite nation called the Kenizzites lived in Canaan. But the term “Kenizzite” could simply mean “son of Kenaz.” Thus Caleb is not a Canaanite. He is called a Kenizzite “by virtue of being associated with a relative or ancestor named Kenaz” (Howard, 327).

In particular I want to make **six** brief observations about Caleb and how his thoroughly theocentric or God-centered perspective governed his life.

(1) We first see what kind of man Caleb was by taking note of *how he and Joshua together responded to the assignment given to them by Moses*. I know that most, if not all, of you are familiar with this incident, but it will do us well to revisit it briefly.

When the people of Israel first arrived on the outskirts of the promised land, Moses commissioned 12 men, among whom were Caleb and Joshua, to sneak into the land and spy out its inhabitants. Here is what he said to them:

“Moses sent them to spy out the land of Canaan and said to them, ‘Go up into the Negeb and go up into the hill country, and see what the land is, and whether the people who dwell in it are strong or weak, whether they are few or many, and whether the land that they dwell in is good or bad, and whether the cities that they dwell in are camps or strongholds, and whether the land is rich or poor, and whether there are trees in it or not. Be of good courage and bring some of the fruit of the land.’ Now the time was the season of the first ripe grapes” (Number 13:17-20).

Now listen to the report that the spies brought back to Moses and the people:

“At the end of forty days they returned from spying out the land. And they came to Moses and Aaron and to all the congregation of the people of Israel in the wilderness of Paran, at Kadesh. They brought back word to them and to all the congregation, and showed them the fruit of the land. And they told him, ‘We came to the land to which you sent us. It flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. However, the people who dwell in the land are strong, and the cities are fortified and very large. And besides, we saw the descendants of Anak there. The Amalekites dwell in the land of the Negeb. The Hittites, the Jebusites, and the Amorites dwell in the hill country. And the Canaanites dwell by the sea, and along the Jordan’” (Numbers 13:17-29).

Caleb was furious! We read in the very next verse that “Caleb quieted the people before Moses and said, ‘Let us go up *at once* and occupy it, for we are able to overcome it’” (Num. 13:30).

The other 10 spies, cowardly and man-centered as they were, responded by saying that the inhabitants of the land were huge and powerful and too strong to be defeated. When we looked at them, said the 10, “we seemed to ourselves *like grasshoppers*” (Num. 13:33b).

God quite simply never factored into their assessment. They saw only the problem and proceeded to shrink! “We’re mere grasshoppers in comparison with those giants! We’ll be crushed under their feet!”

Caleb and Joshua, on the other hand, looked down upon the situation in the land from the perspective of God and his power and his promises. They were looking at the same group of Canaanites as did the 10, but their assessment was altogether different. So, how can 12 men look at the same situation and come away with antithetical conclusions?

“We are but grasshoppers!”

“No,” shouted Caleb, “*they* are!”

The simple explanation is that *the 10 looked at the Canaanites from the ground up, from a human point of view. Caleb and Joshua looked at the Canaanites from heaven down, from a divine point of view.* And my point here today is simply to say that this is how it is with virtually everything in life: either you will try to make sense of God and who he is in the light of your life, circumstances, and your relationships, or you will make sense of them in the light of God.

It wasn't that Caleb and Joshua were “positive thinkers” or overly optimistic whereas the 10 were pessimists. The issue wasn't idealism versus realism. The issue was one of faith versus unbelief!

By the way, *such faith isn't always well received.* It may lead to life-threatening persecution! Later in Numbers 14 Caleb speaks up yet again and appeals to the people of Israel to trust in God and take the land. “Do not fear the people of the land, for they are bread for us. Their protection is removed from them, and the Lord is with us; do not fear them. Then all the congregation said to stone them with stones” (Num. 14:9-10).

(2) Second, *there is perhaps no greater test of Christian character than how one responds while living in the shadow of another believer.* Spiritual maturity is most clearly revealed by how well one functions “behind the scenes” and away from the limelight.

For years Joshua lived and served in the shadow of Moses. For years Caleb lived and served in the shadow of Joshua. He had no less faith than Joshua, perhaps no fewer skills. Yet he willingly and quietly stood beside him, or more likely behind him, supporting and serving him as God's chosen leader, without jealousy or bitterness or resentment.

(3) My third observation comes from *reflections on Caleb's age.* When we come to Joshua 14 Caleb was **85** years old.

We are told in v. 7 that he was 40 when he and Joshua were commissioned by Moses along with the other 10 spies. According to v. 10, an additional 45 years had transpired. This tells us that in addition to the 40 years of wandering in the wilderness, it had taken Israel 5 more years to get to this point in their conquest of Canaan.

Some look at that and are puzzled. They ask, “If God had promised the land to Israel and was fighting for them and had given all their enemies into their hands, why had it taken five years to get to this point? Why didn't God just liquidate the Canaanite nations or cause them to run away in fear?”

Evidently God prefers to accomplish his purposes **for us through us!** At no time in the book of Joshua do we see anyone suggest that based on God's sovereign promises we should adopt a passive, fatalistic, do-nothing-because-

God-does-it-all attitude. God utilizes normal, routine processes of military planning and strategic attack. He calls on the obedience and faith of his people as the means by which his promises come to pass. This cultivates trust rather than presumption. ***Yes, the end is certain, but that never undermines or minimizes the necessity of means.***

So let's return to Caleb's age. He's 85! Sadly today we see people bailing out on God and the local church before they ever come close to so-called "retirement" age. Caleb would have had a thing or two to say to such folk! Old age is a time for energetic commitment to the cause of God and his kingdom. It doesn't necessarily bring weakness and ineffectiveness (even if one is physically disabled one can still be a vital, active, verbal witness). Old age is a time of power and maximum influence.

There is no reason why skepticism and cynicism should increase with age. With Caleb, his faith continued to deepen and grow. Some Christians are spiritually old and worn out by the time they are 30. At 50 they are like slabs of concrete resting on a pew: immovable, ineffective, bitter, critical, inert. Not Caleb! See vv. 10-11!

See also **Psalm 92:12-15** and **Psalm 71:1-18**.

Moses began his career when he was 80! You may not work at the same job forever. You may be forced to step down from the career that occupied you for 50 years. *But there is no such thing as "spiritual" retirement in Scripture.* What do you think of when you envision your later years? IRA's? Tax shelters? A condominium in Florida? More TV? Golf? ***All Caleb could think of were new battles to fight!***

His vibrant confidence in God had not diminished one ounce in the 85 years he had walked on this earth. Look again at v. 12. It is as if Caleb says to Joshua: "Do you remember how everyone whimpered and whined about the fortified cities in Hebron and the strength of the Anakim? They are still there. Let me at 'em!"

(4) My fourth observation is found in the three occurrences of the phrase, "*I wholly followed the Lord my God*" (vv. 8b, 9b, 14b). How many of us can say that about our lives up until now? How many of us will be able to say that when we're 85, like Caleb?

He wholly followed the Lord by trusting in his promises and banking everything on the character of God as good and trustworthy. Note that 5 times in our passage reference is made to what God said and promises (vv. 6, 10a, 10b, 12a, 12b).

My strong suspicion is that what sustained Caleb these many years is that he took the spoken word of God and all his promises and turned them back into both prayer and praise. Thus we read in Psalm 130:5, "I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope."

(5) Fifth, because of Caleb's courageous faith, God had given him two promises through Moses (see vv. 9-10). He had promised him a place in the land and a long life.

Consider how easily Caleb might have justified giving up on God and concluding that he had reneged on his promises. After all, he had spent 40 years wandering in the wilderness with the people of Israel, without ever setting foot in the promised land. 40 years! Try to envision the demands this put on his faith. Is God ever going to give me what he said? Is God ever going to lift his hand of discipline and fulfill his word to his people? ***Day after day, week after week, month after month of frustration and disappointment, year after year of dreams that failed to come true . . . yet Caleb remained faithful and never wavered in his confidence in God.***

And now here he is at the age of 85, hungry for battle! Listen to him: “Bring on the Anakim at Hebron! I’ll take the city for God!”

(6) Finally, notice also Caleb’s ***humility***. We read in v. 12, “***It may be*** that the Lord will be with me, and I shall drive them [the Anakim] out just as the Lord said.” ***As strong and vibrant as his faith was, it never crossed over the line into presumption or arrogance or selfish entitlement.*** Caleb was always, even to the end, cognizant of God’s sovereign freedom. True faith will never dictate to God or write a script for him. The words translated “may be” are not an expression of doubt, but of humility. We would do well to learn from him.

Conclusion:

I want to end today where I began, with this simple but life-changing truth.

How you perceive and think about God will inform and shape how you perceive and think about everything else.

You may well choose to go through life *looking at God from the bottom up*, deciding on who God is allowed to be in your life based on the circumstances and struggles and frustrations you encounter along the way. Or you can choose to approach life like Caleb did by *looking at circumstances from the top down*, filtering everything through the grid of what you know to be true of God. The former is a faith killer, not only your own but the faith of those around you. Don’t forget that when the 10 spies gave their dismal and pessimistic report, it caused the hearts of everyone in Israel to “melt” in fear and cowardice. Caleb’s approach is a faith builder, as his influence in Israel and for the glory of God was massive.