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Caleb's finest hour

by Roy Gane

Born a slave, with a name that means "dog."
 "Hey there, slave boy, what's your name?"

"My name is Caleb, sir."

"Dog...huh, that's appropriate."

But God set Caleb and his people free. Most Israelites never quite understood what freedom was all about. They thought it was milk and honey instead of fleshpots and onions. They thought the man with the magic stick was supposed to lead them comfortably to the Promised Land in no time at all. But when they saw obstacles looming on the horizon, the food and water run out, or the man with the stick disappear up a mountain for a few weeks, their freedom became chaos, their taste buds remembered those fleshpots, and they lusted for slavery because that's what they were—still slaves at heart.

Caleb was different. He knew that freedom was to serve a new, divine Master. Others looked around and complained to Moses, but Caleb looked up to the radiant pillar of cloud and praised the God who had set him free.

Sooner or later, the difference between Caleb's attitude and that of his people was sure to result in a head-on collision. It happened at Kadesh-barnea, in the wilderness of Paran, when he returned from spying out the land of Canaan with eleven other chieftains. The spies were unanimous in affirming that the land did indeed flow with milk and honey, and to prove it they brought some sweet fruit, including a gargantuan cluster of grapes.

But 10 of the spies accentuated the negative: strong people, fortified towns,

giants. Hearts melted and the Promised Land suddenly seemed unpromising. Losing their pre-Christian experience, the Israelites grumbled: "It is because the Lord hates us that he has brought us out of the land of Egypt, to hand us over to the Amorites to destroy us" (Deuteronomy 1:27).^{*} Perfect fear casts out love (contrast 1 John 4:18).

Moses tried to reassure the people, but the clamor of complaining only crescendoed. Then a man stepped forward and cried out, *Has!* which is Hebrew for what it sounds like: "Hush!" It was Caleb of Judah. He was not a polished motivational speaker, but his next words should be the motto and mission statement of anyone who desires to enter the Lord's rest in the better land that He has promised. Caleb urged, "Let us go up at once and occupy it, for we are well able to overcome it" (Numbers 13:30).

Unrealistic?

"We are well able." Unrealistic?! Caleb knew what the fortifications and giants were like because, unlike most of the people, he had seen them. His people lacked the personnel, resources, infrastructure, and budget to overcome the obstacles. But when Caleb said, "We are well able," he included the Lord in the word "We" because God was with His people.

So why didn't Joshua, another spy, also make a speech? He agreed with Caleb. But he had been Moses' assistant. Everyone knew he had vested interests. People who wouldn't listen to Moses certainly wouldn't heed Joshua. But Caleb didn't have this special connec-

tion. He could have easily sided with the other 10 spies. After all, weren't they the majority?

It was theocracy, not majority, that ruled Caleb's heart. Democracy could be a good thing, but not even a landslide vote could budge Caleb's dogged determination to follow the Lord. Perhaps for one brief, shining moment Caleb's courage kindled a spark of hope. But it was quickly quenched when the oral majority took over the podium and began to filibuster. Determined to depress, they badmouthed the land they had earlier praised, saying that it "devours its inhabitants." They exaggerated, likening themselves to grasshoppers in the presence of the inhabitants of Canaan, and they claimed to have seen Nefilim, descendants of the renowned giants who lived before the Flood. Canaan was a Jurassic park, inhabited by humansauruses.

All that night the Israelites watered the wilderness of Paran with their tears, and in the morning they rose up to rebel against their leaders, Moses and Aaron. Joshua and Caleb tore their clothes and pleaded with the people, but got nothing for their trouble except threats: "The whole congregation threatened to stone them" (Numbers 14:10).

So God served the entire adult generation of Israelites a sentence that fitted their crime: They would not enter Canaan, and they would die in the wilderness. Except Caleb and Joshua. The Lord singled out loyal Caleb for special mention: "But my servant Caleb, because he has a different spirit and has followed me wholeheartedly, I will bring into the land into which he went, and his descendants shall possess it"

(Numbers 14:24).

After mourning again, the people arose the next morning, ready to go: "Here we are. We will go up to the place that the Lord has promised, for we have sinned" (vs. 40). This was confession without repentance. Previously unwilling to go where God led, now they wanted to go where he was no longer leading. Against Moses' warning, they "presumed to go up to the heights of the hill country" (vs. 44) and got themselves chased all over southern Palestine.

Lagging behind, rushing ahead, barking up the wrong tree. My home, which we're starting to call the Land of Canine, has two dogs like that. When we go for a walk, it's not natural for Shadow and Prince to "heel." They want to strain at the ends of their leashes in order to be the lead dog, and they are easily distracted by a potential snack of road kill or a deliciously disgusting aroma. To get some control, Connie, my wife, took Shadow to obedience lessons. And although he and Connie have had some serious disagreements, he is learning to stay with us when we walk. It takes time.

It took time for the Israelites to learn to stay with the Lord. He trained them by leading them all over the wilderness, away from distractions.

Hounding the giants out

Forty years didn't make Caleb stronger physically. Neither did they diminish his trust in God. When it finally came time to take the land, 85-year-old Caleb requested the worst possible neighborhood: Hebron, where the most gigantic giants were. As an example to the Israelites, to prove the truth of what he had said at Kadesh-barnea, Caleb volunteered for the greatest challenge and hounded those giants out of town (Judges 1:20). Because he was following the Lord, giants were his natural prey.

Caleb settled down on his inherit-

ance. But we hear of him one more time. He had a daughter named Achsah, and he wanted her to marry a real man. So, as in some fairy tales, he advertised that he would give her to a man who accomplished a heroic deed. In this case, the deed was to take the city of Kiryat-sepher, which means, "Book Town." Othniel won the prize and married Achsah, to whom Caleb gave a piece of land.

Now Achsah was grateful for the land, but to thrive on it her family would need water for irrigation. So she urged Othniel to request a field with springs of water on it. But Othniel was reticent to ask any more from his powerful father-in-law. We can hear Achsah saying, "Go on, Othniel, he's a nice man. You conquered a city, but you're afraid to talk to my father?" Achsah ended up asking Caleb herself, and he generously gave her two sets of springs (Joshua 15:19; Judges 1:15).

Caleb's finest hour

So what was Caleb's finest hour? Perhaps his speech at Kadesh-barnea, when he stood up to the entire Israelite congregation? Or maybe his choice of challenging the Hebron giants? I would suggest another possibility: Caleb's finest "hour" was the 40 years in the wilderness. This was truly a heroic wait. If anyone had a right to complain, it was Caleb. Because of the mistakes of others, he was deprived of 40 years of life in the Promised Land, where he could enjoy milk and honey while sitting under his vine or his fig tree. He didn't need all those years of extra training. He was ready to go. But rather than rushing off to conquer Canaan by himself, he stayed with the Lord and His faulty people.

We learn from the later story of Othniel that Caleb was not idle in the wilderness. He helped educate the next generation to do as he did: to wholeheartedly follow the Lord, to expect great things, and to be assured that God

would provide for His own, just as Caleb provided for his daughter. That next generation did enter the Promised Land, and at a time of crisis Othniel became the first of the judges, who led Israel to deliverance.

Many of us study or work in academia, Book-Town. There have been intellectual battles in the past, and there will be bigger ones in the future. But right now we are in the position of Caleb during the 40 years. We are teaching or learning how to wholeheartedly follow the Lord all the way, in spite of fortifications, giants, and tribulations, to the place where "the Lamb...will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes" (Revelation 7:17).

In the book *Early Writings*, at a strategic point just before describing her first vision (p. 14), Ellen White wrote: "I have tried to bring back a good report and a few grapes from the heavenly Canaan, for which many would stone me, as the congregation bade stone Caleb and Joshua for their report. (Num. 14:10.) But I declare to you, my brethren and sisters in the Lord, it is a goodly land, and we are well able to go up and possess it."

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* All Scripture passages are quoted from the New Revised Standard Version.