

The Obedience of Faith

In *Joshua 14:6-15*, we read the true story of Caleb, a man who demonstrated the obedience of faith. In this passage, aged 85, he tells the story of how it all happened. He had been in his late thirties when the Israelites left Egypt and forty when he was one of the twelve spies sent into the promised land from Kadesh-barnea. Of all those twelve, ten had since died in the wilderness and there were only Joshua and Caleb left. They were the only two who had encouraged the Israelites to go into the land. Because the people were put off by the other ten spies, the whole nation had circled round and round in the desert for 40 years and all the adults had died except Moses, Joshua and Caleb. Then Moses died just before the people entered the land. Only Joshua and Caleb remained from their generation. Joshua was now the leader as Moses had been but Caleb was just an 'ordinary' man. (Not so ordinary for 85, if you look at *verse 11* !) How had he survived to enter the land, and how would he now claim this tough area of country and take possession of it, defeating the Anakim there?

We need to look back to find some answers. More than 600 years before, God had promised Abram (before he changed his name to Abraham) that he would give the land to him and his descendants. See ***Genesis 13:14-18***. Then, in ***Genesis 15:18-21***, the Lord says "To your descendants I have given this land . . ." When the Lord called Moses from the burning bush, he promised to bring the people into this "*good and spacious land, to a land flowing with milk and honey*" (***Exodus 3:8***). Joshua and Caleb quoted this promise when they tried to persuade the people in ***Numbers 14:6-9*** and Caleb gives us a clue in ***Joshua 14:7***. He says that he brought back to Moses the word that was in his heart. Yes, he looked at the problems, but he also looked at the promise and trusted what God had said. Sadly, the people would not do the same then.

Forty years later, their children began to obey. As we read how the Lord commissioned Joshua to lead the people into the promised land, we see how he speaks about *“the land which I am giving them”* as well as saying *“every place on which the sole of your foot treads, I have given it to you, just as I spoke to Moses”*. (see **Joshua 1:1-9**) Here is a clear demonstration of the Lord’s way of working:–

- 1) He has given the land,
- 2) He is giving the land,
- 3) He will give the land to them.

The condition attached to no. 3) is that they have to step out and claim the land on the basis of trusting what the Lord has promised. They could not turn round and complain that the Lord had not, after all, given them the land as he had promised. They had to go in and take possession of it for themselves, though still in close obedience to the word of the Lord. (Compare the two ways in which they tried to capture the city of Ai, in **Joshua 7 & 8**).

This process of possessing the land started with a very strongly symbolic action – the people had to cross the river Jordan. First, the priests had to carry the Ark of the Covenant into the river. As soon as their feet touched the water, the river dried up to provide a clear entrance into the Promised Land. The process had started – the Lord was giving them every place where they put the soles of their feet! They stood there on firm ground until all the rest of the people had crossed the Jordan and then, when the priests stepped out of the river bed, the water began to flow again. That must have been an amazing thing to watch and be part of, an experience not to be forgotten! But the Lord knew that the people **would** easily forget, so he told one man from each tribe to take a stone from the bed of Jordan before the priests stepped out and to take the stones to the place where they would camp for the night. They did, and Joshua built a pile of stones at Gilgal, specially to remember the way they had entered the land!

Read the whole story in **Joshua 3 & 4**.

This is a stirring story, but why are we looking at it?

We have heard much truth about our inheritance in the Lord Jesus Christ, just as the Israelites had been told again and again about the “land flowing with milk and honey”. During those forty years in the wilderness, it must have been a common topic of discussion and the Lord certainly gave Moses abundant information to pass on about how they were to live in the land. They must have known it by heart! But they still had to enter in, to **take what the Lord had given them**.

The promises which we have been given are supposed to lead us into real experience, into practical realisation of what is already ours in Jesus. We need to exercise the obedience of faith as we ‘step out’ to take hold of our inheritance. The Israelites knew that the Lord had given them the land, so they went and took it. Everywhere that they placed the soles of their feet became their inheritance, because it already was!

The key to it all is the word of God. When God speaks the message of Christ to us and we hear and respond, faith has been started. **Romans 10:6-17** underlines the power of “*the word of faith*” which Paul preached. This message of Christ brings us to hearing what God is saying and, when we hear, we can trust and ‘step out’ into what he is telling us is ours. The first step may be the hardest, like the first step into the Jordan by the priests. “Will it really happen?” must have been their unspoken fear, but they stepped out anyway and found that it did. After that first step, it was easier for them and easier for the rest of the people to follow.

“Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you shall be saved”. Haven’t we made that initial step of the obedience of faith? Have we begun to see how our needs can be met and God’s purpose for our lives can be fulfilled if we will take that step of trust into Jesus? Then we need to do it !

Did we take that step some time ago? Have we perhaps forgotten how real it was, an ‘unforgettable’ experience? Do we, as it were, need to return to the pile of stones at Gilgal to be reminded that it really did happen?

If we have done either of these, we find ourselves just inside the 'Promised Land' of being 'in Christ'. Joined to Jesus, forgiven from the guilt of what we have done wrong, set free from being a slave to doing wrong, sharing his life changing us from the inside, beginning to discover the power of the Holy Spirit in the Church – what an inheritance! We need to set out on a fresh journey of exploration of the land and taking possession of it.

If we have started on this voyage of discovery already, there is always more to discover and make our own. Even after the death of his old friend Joshua (aged 110!), Caleb (who may have been even older) was still encouraging his younger countrymen to capture new territory. (**Judges 1:12**) Paul, who knew that part of his ministry was “*to bring about the obedience of faith*” (**Romans 1:5**) still struggled, prayed and suffered, proclaiming Jesus and confronting sin in order to “*present every man complete in Christ*” (**Colossians 1:24-29, Ephesians 1:16-23, 3:14-19 & 4:11-16**) and pressed on himself (**Philippians 3:13-14**.)

Joshua and Caleb.

We could pretend that Joshua was special,
because he had to follow Moses
in leading the people, so
'we could not possibly be like him'.

But Caleb gives us no excuses.
He was not a leader, he was an ordinary man,
but the thing that marks him out from the others
is that, as he put it,
“*I followed the Lord my God fully*”.

May we too learn the obedience of faith!

Dave Taylor October 1997

Further copies can be downloaded from www.justonecandle.uk