

Serving with Confidence
Joshua 14:1-15

“There’s no way I can face that situation! There’s no way I can solve that problem!” Maybe that’s the way you feel today. Maybe some bad choices you’ve made in the past have limited your options for the future. Maybe you feel like you’ve messed up your life so badly that God could never use you in His service. Maybe you don’t feel like you have enough ability or training to deal with other people’s questions or problems. Or maybe you’re at a point in your life where you just don’t have as much energy as you used to have. And so maybe taking on any sort of new challenge is the last thing on your mind.

And it would have been easy for Caleb to be discouraged like this. After all, he and Joshua were the only two old men among all the Israelites – all the others of their generation had died in the desert because of their unfaithfulness. That meant Caleb was 85 years old at the time of this passage – a point at which most of us would be well into our retirement years.

So, why had Caleb and Joshua survived so long? Because, out of the 12 spies that had been sent into the Promised Land some 45 years previously, only they had been faithful to God, urging the people to go in and possess the land the Lord their God had given them. And what sort of discouraging report had the other ten spies made, a report so frightening that all the hearts of the people had melted when they heard it? The unfaithful spies had told of great walled cities populated by Anakim, people of enormous size. In the face of such obstacles, they could see no way that the Promised Land could possibly be conquered.

Now remember – Caleb had seen the same giants and the same city walls. He mentions them himself in verse 12. And in verse 10 he is honest about his age. And yet he was willing, even eager to go into the Promised Land and conquer the particular part of it that would become his inheritance – giants, castles and all.

Okay, so let’s do what all of the spies did. Let’s take an honest look at our inheritance. Let’s look at the situation all around us. What kinds of giants and castles do we face? Have all our loved ones’ problems been solved? Have all the people around us become loyal subjects of Jesus Christ? Has our culture truly been brought into submission to the Kingdom of God?

Let’s see. More and more people are dropping out of church, and young people are especially likely to describe themselves as having no religion at all. Our families are in tatters and more and more children are born without both parents to care for them. Largely as a result, our schools are failing, drug use is rising, and the cycle of children having children continues. Even here in traditional, Bible-belt Mississippi there are lots of people who never darken the door of a church, and who look instead to all sorts of other things – guns, government, booze, pills, social media, computer games, sex or money – to make them feel better. Caleb may have faced walled cities filled with giants, but our social illnesses are no less daunting, no easier to solve. And some of these problems have invaded our own circles of friends, our own families, even in our own hearts.

Okay, so given his very real limitations, and given the difficulty of the task that lay before him, why was Caleb so eager to charge into battle for the Lord? And how can his example help us move forward into the frankly difficult mission field where God has placed each of us?

Well, in the first place, Caleb could have such confidence because he was relying on the promises of God. In verse 9, he recalls this promise, which was first made some 45 years earlier, back in Numbers 14:24. At that time, the Lord Himself said, "My servant Caleb, because he has a different spirit in him and has followed Me fully, I will bring into the land where he went, and his descendants shall inherit it." In other words, Caleb could face his biggest problems with confidence because He was trusting in the promises of God.

And the same thing was true for the people in Isaiah's time. They were about to face problems even worse than Caleb's, even worse than ours. Because of their continued faithlessness, Isaiah told them the Babylonians were going to conquer them, and take the few of them that would be left alive into captivity. And yet, Isaiah could declare the wonderful promises of God to His people that we found in our responsive reading from chapter 43, promises we also sang in our opening hymn.

And God still makes the same sorts of promises to His people today, no matter what our problems may be. Even if we're way in over our heads, even if we have to walk through fire, God will be with us. God will protect us, even in the midst of sickness and sorrow, even in the midst of addiction and grief, even in the midst of poverty and persecution.

Moreover, God has promised to bring His people to Himself from the east and west, from the north and the south – even from the ends of the earth. He has promised to reveal His glory even to those whose eyes are blind, and to proclaim His truth even to those whose ears are deaf. He has promised that no one and nothing can stand in the way of Him accomplishing His purposes – even today, even in Southwest Mississippi, even among those we know who are so resistant to the claims of Christ.

Ah, but how can we be sure that God will in fact keep His promises in our particular situations? How can we be so confident that God will in fact break down all the strongholds of falsehood and self-will all around us, subduing the people that seem so unalterably opposed to Him?

Well, what else gave Caleb so much confidence? Look back at verse 10, where he simply says, "Look – the Lord has kept me alive, as He said, these forty-five years." Think about that. God had promised that Caleb would live to go into the Promised Land. And for forty-five years, all the time that the children of Israel had been wandering in the desert, Caleb saw all the people of his generation pass away, one by one. But his time never came. Eventually, he and Joshua were the only ones left of that entire generation. And so his very life was evidence that God keeps His promises.

And the fact that God kept His promise to Caleb can serve as a building block for our own faith. In fact, every one of the promises God has made and kept throughout the Scriptures should increase our trust in Him.

For example, in our responsive reading from Isaiah 43, God promised His people that He would bring them back into the Promised Land from their exile in Babylon – and God kept that promise. And God keeps on keeping that same promise. For today, He is still bringing in His sons and daughters from afar, from the very ends of the earth – Muslims from Syria who are hearing and responding to the gospel in Lebanon and Communists from China who are joining house churches by the millions. Even in Iran, in spite of intense persecution from the Shiite government, thousands are coming to faith in Christ.

And come to think of it, aren't we all evidence of God's faithfulness and God's grace? Hasn't God brought all of us out of darkness and into His marvelous light? Hasn't God opened our ears to hear how Jesus laid down His life so that sinners like us could be forgiven? Hasn't God opened our hearts to respond to this good news, trusting in Christ as Savior and bowing the knee to Him as Lord? Hasn't God helped us become more like Christ, putting aside old habits and hangups? So, if God has done all of this for us, why do we think He is unable or unwilling to do the same for those we love?

But God's faithfulness isn't just demonstrated in the past – we can also see it in the way God has equipped us for service in the future. In verse 11, Caleb marveled that, even though he was 85 years old, he was still vigorous, still able to participate in the conquest of the land. In other words, he looked at the gifts and abilities God had given him as evidence that God would in fact use him to advance the cause of God's Kingdom.

And the same thing is true for all of us – yes, all of us. Sure, we can go on focusing on our weaknesses and our limitations, but why not take a look at our strengths instead? Why not look at how God has equipped us to be a blessing to others?

You know, one of the best things about Mississippi is our connections – we know so many people, and we come into contact with them so often. Well, that network not only defines our mission field. It's also one of the most powerful tools that we have.

That's true. Most people attend a new church not because they see a sign or read a Facebook post but because a friend invites them. Moreover, people are more willing to share their doubts and fears and concerns with true friends. People are more likely to listen to the call of Christ if they hear it from friends, from those who really know them and who really care for them.

Look, big churches in big cities spend lots of money and effort trying to gather people into community, putting on all sorts of programs to help people build relationships where Christian growth can take place. Y'all, we already have the community. We already have the relationships. We're so much further along than so many other places in the country.

And think about the cultural advantages we have in Mississippi. No, Christian teachings may not be as pervasive as they once were, but there's still a widespread, if vague awareness of Biblical truth. For example, you can talk about sin and people generally know what you mean. Moreover, we don't have to hide our faith – there are no legal or cultural barriers that prevent us from sharing the truth of Christ with those who need Him. That's just not true in other countries, or even in other regions of the US.

And think about all the tools God has given us as a congregation. We have a rich heritage of sound Biblical teaching and theological orthodoxy. As a member of the EPC, we are partnered with hundreds of likeminded congregations so we can participate in denominational church planting and mission projects without hesitation. And compared to many congregations both here in the US and around the world, we are not seriously hindered by financial limitations.

Yes, God has promised to draw people to Himself from all over the world – even in Southwest Mississippi. And God has equipped all of us, both in the past and in the present, to participate in His mission to those around us, those in our networks of relationships. But there's one more thing we can

learn from Caleb, one more reason we can step out in love and service with the same kind of confidence that he had – his reliance on God’s providence, his certainty that God would in fact bless his efforts.

Now, it’s easy to take this sort of confidence too far. It’s easy for us to assume that God will give success to whatever whacky ministry ideas we might dream up. “If you build it they will come,” might apply to the ghosts of baseball players in an Iowa cornfield, but it certainly isn’t true of every church plant – even the Southern Baptists have only a 68% success rate. Sometimes, our ideas – no matter how sincere they are and no matter how faithful we think they are – just aren’t part of God’s plan.

And Caleb understood the need for humility when embarking on any great work for God. Notice at the end of verse 12 that he says he will succeed in his mission “if so be the Lord will be with me.” Caleb did not dare presume upon God’s grace, and neither should we. As we bear witness to Christ among our friends and neighbors, we must constantly be on our knees, pleading to God that He would open their eyes and ears, that He would soften their hearts, and that He would allow our words and actions to communicate His truth and love accurately and effectively.

But at the same time, Caleb did not allow this very proper humility to prevent him from moving forward in his service to God. For if he did not presume upon God’s grace, he continued to rely on that grace. For in verse 12 he made it clear that if the Lord was with him, he would indeed be able to accomplish the work God had given him to do, fulfilling the promises that God had made to him.

And we can have the same confidence. For the same God has promised that His Kingdom would indeed spread over all the world. The same God has equipped all of us to show and share the love and truth of Christ within our networks of relationships. And the same God is able to accomplish His good and perfect will through us, in spite of our weaknesses, regardless of how difficult the task might seem.

In Jesus Christ, God has kept His promises to save the world. And Jesus continues to rule and reign, spreading the truth and justice of His Kingdom everywhere. Will we rely on His promises? Whatever the task may be set before us, will we serve Him with confidence?