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Wholeheartedly Following The Lord

Joshua 14.7-14

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There's a saying you may have heard before, *"It's not how you start; it's how you finish."* There's some truth in that statement. I say, "some truth" because if you don't start well, you may not have the opportunity to finish. The most painful thing for me watching the Summer Olympics was to see an athlete who spent years training for the opportunity to compete get disqualified due to a false start. Andre De Grasse of Canada won the Men's 100 meters, but only after watching watched two competitors false start before he could win his heat and another competitor committed a false start in his semi-final. Britain's Zharnel Hughes was disqualified for a false start the men's 100m final. To make matters worse, when a runner committed a false start, an official would walk over, stand right in front of them, hold up a large colored card for all the world to see, then walk them off the track and out of sight. The poor crestfallen runners looked like they were being banished to prison or worse. All their Olympic dreams up in smoke without even getting to run. It was awful. My heart ached for them.

A positive example of, *"It's not how you start; it's how you finish,"* happened in Brewster on Wednesday. The Brewster Whitecaps were playing the Bourne Braves in Game Two of the Cape Cod Baseball League Championship with the Whitecaps one win from the title. The first five batters of the game scored for Bourne. The Whitecaps were down 5-0 before they recorded an out. But *"It's not how you start; it's how you finish."* The Whitecaps got two runs back in the first and kept competing, scoring a run in the third and fourth innings, two in the fifth to take the lead, and four in the seventh to put the game away. They were resilient, never quit, and finished well.

If you want to finish well in any endeavor, it helps to start well, but it's not always essential. To finish well, requires giving your best wholehearted effort without being defeated or discouraged by the size of the challenge or the adversity you face. Two weeks ago, I preached on Embracing Uncertainty and how you cope when you find yourself, sometimes suddenly, in the wilderness of life. That message resonated with many of you who communicated with me that you're in a wilderness now, and some of you are in the most challenging period of your life. For all of us an important question is,

“How do I finish well?” Finishing well requires faith, courage, and commitment for the long haul. Half-hearted effort won’t get it done. When I officiate at a wedding, the vows I suggest to the couple include the phrase, *“With my whole heart, and with my complete devotion, I pledge my love to you.”* How would it sound if you said to your future spouse, *“Half-heartedly and with sporadic devotion, when I feel like it, I’ll love you if it’s easy and convenient.”* Just doesn’t sound quite the same, does it?

Today I want to share with you about an inspiring Biblical character named Caleb. Caleb was someone who embraced life wholeheartedly, who was devoted, courageous, and finished well. Two weeks ago, I read **Numbers 14.1-11** which included Joshua and Caleb, imploring the people to trust God and to believe they could successfully conquer their foes, you heard more of that story earlier today from Numbers 13. Here is part of Caleb’s story from **Joshua 14:7-14** which takes place **45 years after** the events in Numbers 13 and 14. Caleb is speaking.

“I was **40 years old** when Moses the servant of the LORD sent me from Kadesh-Barnea to spy out the land; and I brought him **an honest report**. But my companions who went up with me **made the heart of the people melt; Yet I wholeheartedly followed the LORD my God**. And Moses swore on that day, saying, ‘Surely the land on which your foot has trodden shall be an inheritance for you and your children forever, **because you have wholeheartedly followed the LORD my God.**’ And now, as you see, **the Lord has kept me alive, as he said, these 45 years since** the time the Lord spoke this word to Moses, while Israel was journeying through the wilderness; and here I am today, 85 years old. I am still as strong today as I was on the day that Moses sent me; my strength now is as my strength was then, for war, and for going and coming. So now give me this hill country of which the LORD spoke on that day; For you heard on that day how the Anakim were there, with great fortified cities; it may be that the LORD will be with me, and I shall drive them out, as the LORD said.”

Then Joshua blessed him, and gave Hebron to Caleb son of Jephunneh (je-fuhn-nuh) for an inheritance. So Hebron became the inheritance of Caleb son of Jephunneh the Kenizzite to this day, **because he wholeheartedly followed the LORD, the God of Israel.**”

Caleb is one of my favorite Biblical characters. We learn about him in the story of the Israelites spying out the land in Numbers 13 and 14 and in Joshua 14. There were 12 spies who went on that reconnaissance mission. Caleb and Joshua brought back an honest, favorable report and ten others who brought back a frightened, unfavorable report about the dangers and difficulties that awaited them if they tried to go forward into God's future. In the face of the challenges that lay ahead, their report concluded with the profoundly revealing statement of their feelings of inadequacy (Num. 13:33b), ***“And to ourselves we seemed like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them.”***

We all remember the names of the other 10 spies they were, uh, you remember them.... Shammua, Shaphat, Igal, Palti, Gaddiel, Gaddi, Ammiel, Sethur, Nahbi, and Geuel. Why don't we remember these people? Every single one of them was a leader, hand-picked by Moses, presumably for his faith, influence, skill, leadership, intelligence, and courage. They were concerned for the safety and well-being of the people they led and for whom they felt responsible. They hoped to preserve their people and their traditions, and they felt the safest thing to do would be to return to the past and to keep doing what they knew how to do. This seemed a better decision than going into a crowded, multi-cultural future with all kinds of “ltes” to compete with: new age Amalekites, fundamentalist Hittites, materialistic Jebusites, universalist Amorites, and post-modern Canaanites.

There always has been and always will be significant challenges in our lives whatever our context. There will always be people who seem strange to us, giant-size problems, and cities with walls of issues to confront. Caleb teaches us they are to be faced with faith, courage, and a willingness to risk. Pastor Larry Osborne offers this observation: *“The most striking thing about highly effective leaders is how little they have in common. What one swears by, another warns against. But **one trait stands out: the willingness to risk.**”* It's easy to criticize the other ten leaders for their lack of faith, courage, passion, and boldness, but if someone were to write a story about your life, would it reveal more of Shammua's spirit or Caleb's?

Like many people today, Caleb enters God's service in mid-life. He is 40 years old when he joins the team spying out the land. Caleb brings back an **honest report** –

sometimes you may fear speaking the truth about the opportunities and threats you face. In his book, *Good to Great*, Jim Collins asserts that part of a leader's job is to help people confront the brutal facts of reality and act on the implications. Caleb is honest, *"this is what we're up against,"* but he's also hopeful that with God's help they can succeed. Unfortunately, his companions *"made the heart of the people melt."* We don't want to melt the hearts of other people. Caleb didn't deny the threats and challenges, but his passion and faith were greater than his fears. When you find yourself in the wilderness of life, when there is no going back and threats and challenges lying ahead, what is needed is passionate, committed faith. Lack of courage sabotages more people than lack of ability. Don't beat yourself before you start.

Three times in Joshua 14 we're told Caleb is known for **"wholeheartedly following the Lord his God."** Caleb is a man of passion and enthusiasm. Teaching is a very honorable and challenging profession and God bless all the teachers and school staff returning and preparing to return to school once again in very challenging circumstances. Teachers have a hard job. I will say, however, when I was in school, if the teacher wasn't enthusiastic about the subject he or she was teaching, I wasn't either. I figured if the teacher wasn't excited about what he or she was sharing, why should I be excited about listening to them? Enthusiasm is contagious. Jesus wants people who will follow him and serve him and love him wholeheartedly. In **Revelation 3:15-16** Jesus says to the church, *"I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. So then because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth."* That is a spiritual way of saying those not fired with enthusiasm will be fired with enthusiasm.

British theologian John Henry Newman wrote, *"Fear not that your life will come to an end but that it will never have a beginning."* Caleb wholeheartedly and passionately follows the Lord, not for a season, but for a lifetime. Caleb is 85 years old and after 45 years of journeying through the wilderness, he is still going strong. He remains confident in God and in his ability. He is the epitome of the righteous older person described in **Psalms 92:14-15**, *"In old age they still produce fruit; they are always green and full of sap, showing that the Lord is upright; he is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in*

him.” Caleb and that Psalmist understood about finishing well. There is a tremendous need for mature, experienced Christians to be mentoring younger people and sharing and modeling how to be a life-long disciple of Jesus.

When you need encouragement and confidence – when the challenges are real, the giants big, the “Ites” are all against you, - you can remember our God is with you to give you encouragement and confidence even in the most painful times of suffering, heartache and even death and loss. Dying on the cross Jesus said of his work for kingdom of heaven, ***“It is finished.”*** All of us have work to be done in God’s name and we need to run strong to the end and finish it. Americans may love winners, but God loves finishers. The Apostle Paul states at the end of his life in **2 Timothy 4.7**, ***“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.”***

I started by talking about the Olympics and will close with one more thought related to the Summer Games. It was great they were able to hold the competition, but sad that the Japanese people and the family and friends of the athletes, and fans from around the world couldn’t pack the stadiums and venues with their presence and energy, to cheer their encouragement. Athletes often remark on how the energy and support of a crowd makes a difference. **Hebrews 12.1-3**, it picks up on that imagery to encourage you and me to finish well. *“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, 2 looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. 3 Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart.”*

When you’re feeling tired, discouraged, or ready to quit remember that God honors those, like Caleb, Jesus, and Paul, and many others all those who persevere and conquer and finish. With God’s help you can too.

Please join me in a spirit of prayer as I share a prayer by Saint Augustine:

God of our life, there are days when the burdens we carry chafe our shoulders and weigh us down; when the road seems dreary and endless, the skies gray and threatening; when our lives have no music in them, and our hearts are lonely, and our souls have lost their courage. Flood the path with light, run our eyes to where the skies are full of promise; tune our hearts to brave music give us the sense of comradeship with heroes and saints of every age; and so quicken our spirits that we may be able to encourage the souls of all who journey with us on the road of life, to your honor and glory.

Blessing: 1 Corinthians 15:58, *“Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.”* May God bless you as you passionately, obediently, enthusiastically, and wholeheartedly love and follow and serve the Lord.

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. What is something people would say you do or follow “wholeheartedly” (For example, knit, work, follow a sports team, paint, etc.)?
2. Being honest with yourself, what is something you do half-heartedly (this would be something your less than enthusiastic about doing)?
3. *“It’s not how you start; it’s how you finish.”* There is some truth in this statement, but it’s not 100 % true in all situations. Why is finishing well, sometimes more important than how we start?
4. What do you admire or appreciate about Caleb’s life that you would like to emulate more in your own?
5. Are there “giants” or “walled cities” that you’re facing that you find frightening or intimidating? What are they? What can you take from the life of Caleb to help you in the battle you’re facing?
6. How can you more wholeheartedly follow the Lord in your life whatever your circumstances? What would that look like for you in terms of trust, courage, faith, commitment, or something else?