

Joshua 14:6-15

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Date: 26 December 2010

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[0 : 0 0] May I say once again that it's a pleasure, a joy to be with you here in Bon Accord in God's providence. I've had many opportunities to share worship with you, either sitting there or standing here in this building or in the old building on D Street, and it's good to come back and have fellowship with you. Just one comment before we turn to God's Word. We've been worshipping with you actually at least a couple of occasions since we were here last physically in Aberdeen.

Last Sunday, we couldn't get the car out with all the snow and ice, and so we joined in worship here, the live online service. I must confess that we were sitting in front of the computer at about 20 to 11, and we both said, well, time for a coffee first, and we'll, I think they start at 5 to 11.

So we didn't quite get the first part of the service, but it was a pleasure, a joy to be with you. And indeed, four weeks ago was another occasion when we couldn't get the car out with the snow and ice, and we went on online, and we shared, it was very moving to share with you in five baptisms that day, an adult baptism, Sophie with her two children, and the other two children.

We shared with Jonathan as he spoke to the children, and then shared in the praise, and in the reading, and the preaching of God's Word. So we do pray, praise God for that ministry, and pray that it will continue to be blessed. And it's great that you have people who have gifts to do that, so that God's Word will reach out even further than the four walls of this building. I'd like us to turn back to Joshua chapter 14. We're going to look at the whole of the main section from verse 6, but let's read again at verse 13, Joshua 6 on page 230, Joshua 14 rather, at verse 13.

Then Joshua blessed Caleb, son of Jephunneh, and gave him Hebron as his inheritance. So Hebron has belonged to Caleb, son of Jephunneh the Kenizzite ever since, because he followed the Lord, the God of Israel wholeheartedly. Today, either this morning or in the evening, we meet for the last time in public worship in 2010. So there's no doubt that it's a highly appropriate time to look back over the year that has gone, reflecting on its highs and lows, how we've got on as individuals, and you as a congregation, what progress we've made, what our failures have been, what lessons there are for the year ahead.

[3 : 5 0] Everyone does it. The newspapers, the TV, the radio, they list the political, the economic, the sporting, the entertainment highlights, and mess-ups of the year that has passed. And right now, everybody's asking, if as a country, we need a completely new assessment of how we should tackle these extremes of snow and ice, so as to avoid the chaos of January 2010 and December of 2010.

So in the light of all that, let's not lose, you and I, let's not lose the God-given chance of doing this ourselves this last Sunday of another year. Let's not just drift into 2011.

Let's put ourselves and our congregation—well, our congregation, for me, it's down at Leith in Edinburgh, for yourselves here in Aberdeen. Let's put ourselves then under the scrutiny of God's Word for the twelve months that have passed, so that with fresh purpose and vision, we can make 2011 the best year yet in our witness for Christ and service to the world.

And that's certainly the way that this man, Caleb, looked at things. Actually, he's not just standing as we are on the threshold of a new year, looking back simply on a single year that has passed. He's reviewing his entire life. And amazingly, at the age of eighty-five, he's making plans for an even more effective life of faith.

What a life he's lived up till now. For the first forty years of his life, he toiled as a slave in Egypt, and he must often have wondered if God had forgotten his people.

[6 : 20] A chosen people. A chosen people. Chosen for what? For never-ending, back-breaking drudgery under the burning sun, lashed constantly by the sharp tongues and the even sharper whips of the cruel Egyptian guards.

And then the day of deliverance came. And with it, there wasn't only the relief of fleeing forever from the land of bondage, but the promise of a new and a beautiful land, a land flowing with milk and honey.

But as Caleb looks back, he remembers how as a forty-year-old, he had stood on the brink of the promised land.

He'd reveled, and the prospects had held out. You remember how he'd tasted the luscious fruits of Canaan? And then, everything had crumbled into dust before his eyes. You have it there in verse eight, where it says, "My brothers, my brothers, who went up with me, made the hearts of the people sink." And the result? Forty years of desert wandering. It wasn't his fault, but he, the innocent, had to suffer along with the guilty.

But now, forty-five years later, he thanks God for finally bringing him into part, at least, of the promised land.

[8 : 16] So, time to put his feet up? Not a bit of it. Look at verses 10 and 11. So, here I am today, forty-five years old. I'm still as strong today as the day Moses sent me out.

I'm just as vigorous to go out to battle now as I was then. Now, give me this hill country the Lord promised me that day.

So, are you and I, then, ready to stand before God and review this last Lord's Day of 2010, not only the year that has passed, but like Caleb, your whole life in the light of God's call, God's promises, God's expectations of you?

John Newton, the converted slave trader who became a preacher of the gospel, he did just that towards the end of his long life.

Well aware of his sinful failures, he wrote these words, I'm not what I ought to be. I'm not what I want to be. I'm not what I want to be.

[9 : 44] I'm not what I hope to be in another world. But still, I'm not what I once used to be. And by the grace of God, I am what I am.

Now, you and I, we may not have the dramatic testimony, the preaching gifts, or the long life, well into his 80s, like Caleb, of John Newton.

We may not be able to perform as Christians in the way that an even older free church elder, whom some of you know, continues to serve the Lord.

I'm referring to the senior elder of our own congregation in Leith, Donnie Jack. He'll be 88 in a couple of weeks' time.

Yet Friday after Friday, in rain or wind or snow, he stands out on Leith Walk, inviting passersby into our free lunch, and persuasively encouraging them to step into where they'll receive a warm welcome and hear the gospel.

[11 : 04] Well, we may not be able to do what John Newton did and was, or what this friend is and does.

But still, let Caleb guide us to assess where we're at and what God can do for us and through us in the year ahead.

Now, I expect you noticed in our reading that a particular phrase was repeated several times.

You have it in verse 8, verse 9, and verse 14, where we read that Caleb followed the Lord his God wholeheartedly.

You see, you knew where you were with Caleb. Others could be praising Moses one minute, then shouting him down.

[12 : 08] They could be swearing loyalty to God one minute, then bowing down to dumb idols. They could be marching resolutely to Canaan one minute, then desperate to get back to Egypt, the very land of bondage from which they'd fled.

Not Caleb. He had his sights firmly fixed on the land of promise. He followed the Lord his God with all his heart.

That was his resolve. That was his testimony from beginning to end. And it's a testimony that you find spelt out in these three verses, in this passage, in three different ways.

First of all, you've got the testimony of his own conscience. That's in verse 8. The testimony of his own conscience, where we read, Now, we have to pause a moment, and you may be asking if that sounds proud or arrogant.

Is it a bit like Peter? Lord, even if all fall away on account of you, I never will. I'm ready to go with you to prison and to death.

[13 : 34] And we all know how miserably Peter failed. The testimony of his conscience wasn't worth a scrap. But as you study the life of Caleb, you realize that this wasn't a case of boasting, but rather a declaration of intent.

He wasn't in the business of pouring scorn on others who had failed, like politicians who pounce on their opponents' slightest misdemeanors to ridicule them or hound them out of office.

Caleb had been called by God. He'd made promises to God. And come what may, he was determined by God's grace to keep them.

Like his friend Joshua, he made it clear that God came first in his life, whatever others might do or think.

You remember what Joshua said? You have it in chapter 24 of the same book, verse 15. Choose for yourselves, he said to all the people, this day whom you will serve.

[14 : 54] But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord. I think the old Bible commentator, Matthew Henry, puts it very well.

What he says, commenting on these words of Caleb's, I wholly followed the Lord my God. He says, it wasn't vain glory in Caleb to speak of it, that is, of his wholehearted resolve, any more than it is for those who have God's Spirit witnessing to their spirits that they are the children of God, humbly and thankfully to tell others for their encouragement what God has done for their souls.

So, as this year ends, what testimony does your conscience give about your life, where it's going and what it's doing?

For some, maybe the question is, what about your soul and your relationship to God?

Have you perhaps, during 2010 and maybe for a long time before, have you been saying in your own mind, if not outwardly, that yes, you really do intend to hand over your life to Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord, but somehow or other, it's never happened?

[16 : 36] And does that mean that sadly you resonate with the words of the prophet Jeremiah, the summer has passed, the harvest has ended, and we are not saved?

When I was a student, I spent a year in northern France. And once a week, I spent a night with a young pioneer brethren missionary.

He lived in a tiny miner's cottage with no central heating and no running water. And that winter was bitterly cold.

No snow, but piercing frosts. And I can tell you that getting up in the morning was no joke. I would be lying huddled there under the blankets when suddenly from the other bed a loud shout would be heard.

I must admit, misapplying scripture. And what the voice was saying was, Bed! Hinder me not! And there would Peter, my friend, there he would be jumping up and down on the bare floor, getting dressed, and heading to the outside tap for freezing cold water to wash in.

[18 : 15] Well, I couldn't stay in bed after that, could I? Caleb wouldn't have done it. Nor would Paul, who counted all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Jesus Christ his Lord.

So, when Jesus calls you on this last Sunday of another year to deny yourself and take up your cross and follow him, let your conscience, your mind, your heart, your will, all reply, Satan, hinder me not!

Lord Jesus, I come. But then, for others, what testimony does your conscience give you with regard to your public confession of your faith in Christ?

Are you still, maybe, like Joseph of Arimathea, a disciple of Jesus secretly for fear?

Now, I don't deny that it's more difficult for some people than for others to let it be known openly that they're Christians. and in many countries today, as we remembered in prayer earlier on, it can mean harassment, loss of income, public humiliation, imprisonment, even death.

[19 : 47] But even in our own country, for some, it can mean the loss of friendships, of family support, of employment opportunities, of academic respectability.

Caleb knew that the way ahead, even when he was aged 85, would be no bed of roses, that the road would wind uphill all the way, even to the very end.

So will 2011 be different for you? No holding back, no sitting out the Lord's table, or refusing to accept the responsibilities of church membership, or unwilling to participate in the prayer meetings or neighborhood fellowships, so as to keep all your options open for your career and your life in this world.

Caleb followed the Lord his God wholeheartedly. will you? So here's Caleb with a testimony of his own conscience.

But then, in the second of the three verses that use the same phrase, we find the testimony of others, the testimony of other people with regard to Caleb.

[21 : 13] Look at verse 9. Verse 9 says, Not I, but you. You have followed the Lord my God wholeheartedly.

Now, these have been Moses' words about Caleb many, many years before. And clearly, there were also the testimony of the men of Judah, mentioned in verse 6, who came along with Caleb in order to back him up before Joshua.

Now, it's perfectly true, as Jesus said to his disciples, that we should beware when all men speak well of us.

Caleb had seen that in practice when ten of his fellow spies, you remember the story well, ten of his fellow spies, forty-five years previously, had urged the people to reject Caleb's report about the land of Canaan.

And as a result, the ten received the people's plaudits, while Caleb and Joshua were booed off the platform when everybody was threatened with stoning.

[22 : 33] Jesus was right. These ten men should have bewareed when everyone spoke well of them. Truth was with the minority, not with the honey-tongued majority.

And it's also true that in the church, we are not called to be a mutual admiration society.

Paul and Peter were good friends, and they loved each other. And yet, on one famous occasion, you remember what Paul said to Peter?

He opposed Peter to his face because he was clearly in the wrong, Galatians 2.11. However, it's equally true that we should do our best to live in such a way that we can earn the good testimony, as Caleb did, first of all, of the church.

We're told about Timothy, that the brothers in Lystra and Iconium spoke well of him, young and inexperienced though he was.

[23 : 56] And years later, when this same Timothy wrote about the qualifications necessary for church leadership, he describes in very practical terms, people who not only talk the talk, but walk the walk.

Jesus sums it up very well indeed when he says to his disciples, let your light shine before men that they may see your good deeds and praise you, Father, who is in heaven.

But this question of the impact of our testimony on other people, you, holy followed, it goes further.

We're not just called to impress other people in the church with our testimony, because some of them might be a bit too ready to gloss over our failings.

In describing elders, Timothy goes as far as to say he must also have a good reputation with, not just the church, but with outsiders.

[25 : 14] And talking about money matters, Paul says in 2 Corinthians 8, 21, we are taking pains to do what is right, not only in the eyes of the Lord, but also in the eyes of men.

So then, Christian friend, and I ask myself the same question, what do other Christians say about you? Not in a gossipy way, not when they should be minding their own business, but not because they're catty or mean or hypocritical, but like Moses, like Joshua, like some at least of these men of Judah in verse 6, people who had a heart for God and for his cause and for his honor.

And in the light of that, they looked at this man, Caleb, and they said with true conviction and gratitude, you have wholly followed the Lord your God and the Lord our God with all your heart.

And remember this, with Caleb, we're not dealing with a man in a position of leadership. He wasn't a Moses.

He wasn't a Joshua. He worked away in the background. He followed God wholeheartedly without the cameras on him, without any promise of high office or great possessions.

[26 : 52] Caleb didn't know that his name would go down in history and that 3,000 or whatever years later on, we'd be talking about him.

He just followed the Lord his God with all his heart. So, in fact, he was just like most of us, who aren't prominent in leadership in either church or society, who aren't among the world's richest men, or figuring in the media spotlight.

So, what's the testimony of others about you? I wonder if they can say about me as about you, that all year you didn't give up meeting together as some are in the habit of doing, whether in public worship on the Lord's Day or in prayer meetings or other fellowship meetings.

Can they say that you were always willing to cooperate when you could in the church's ministries of mercy, or service to the young, or care for the old, or encouragement of the downcast, and the burdened?

Can they say that your heart burned to go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature, even though physically you weren't able to leave Aberdeen all year?

[28 : 23] Can the world say, broadening it, as Scripture does, can the world say, not just the church, that you were always honest and committed and eager to keep improving in all your business or family or academic affairs?

I wonder if, in all honesty, you can say to me or I can say to you, you have followed the Lord your God with all your heart.

So, as Caleb looks back, there's this testimony of his own conscience, there's the testimony of others, and then finally, there is the testimony of God.

And you've got that in verse 14. In that verse, the inspired writer of the book of Joshua says, not I, not you, but he.

He followed the Lord, the God of Israel, wholeheartedly. Now, the Bible is the Word of God. So, this verdict is God's verdict.

[29 : 35] He obviously used some pen man, the writer of the book of Joshua, but it's God's Word, it's God's verdict on this man Caleb.

He followed the Lord as God. Now, Caleb's own conscience told him that that was true, but even the best of consciences can go wrong sometimes through the pervasive influence of sin.

Godly men told Caleb that this was true, but godly men can make mistakes even when they feel sure they're doing God's will.

But here, what we have is God speaking, and he says of Caleb that he wholly followed the Lord his God. You know, that's an incredible testimony.

The holy God in heaven says of a poor, weak, no doubt in some ways failing mortal, you, I'm pleased with you.

[30 : 42] You've followed me, the Lord your God, wholeheartedly. And it's incredible because you remember that the Bible tells us that we're all sinners, that the best of men are but men at best, that all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags in God's sight, and that when we've done everything we could, we still have to say we're but unprofitable servants.

And you see that right through the Bible. Job said things he shouldn't have said, and yet here we have God declaring about Job, there's no one on earth like him, he's blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil.

David said many things and did many things that were really terrible, and yet here in the Bible you have God saying about him that he is a man after God's own heart.

The Bible doesn't tell us everything about Caleb. I don't know. I wonder if perhaps he lost his temper sometimes, or he was hard on his children sometimes, or he fell asleep in prayer sometimes, we don't know, but he was human, a saved godly man though he was, and yet in spite of all that, God assures us that he followed the Lord his God wholeheartedly.

and as we draw to a close in this study, there are two things in this respect, God's testimony of a sinful man that he followed God wholeheartedly.

[32 : 37] Two things we have to remember. Firstly, that all these people and millions of God's children since then have all recognized their sin and come to God for forgiveness and cast themselves trustingly on him.

Job puts it this way, my ears have heard of you, but now my eyes have seen you, therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.

David in the midst of all his sin, he puts it this way, blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sins are covered, blessed is the man whose sin the Lord does not count against him.

And Paul, who confesses that he was the worst of sinners, Paul puts it this way, he says, in spite of all that, God will credit righteousness to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead.

He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification. So, if today you are in Jesus, trusting in him for forgiveness, rejoicing in his gift of eternal life, then and only then you can follow the Lord your God wholeheartedly in spite of the stumblings and the shortcomings and the broken promises and the conduct that's made you weep as you consider yourself and what you've been or not been as a Christian.

[34 : 24] The other thing to remember is this. God knows very well that though in Christ his Son, we are completely justified, and he looks on us as if we'd never sinned, because Jesus never did and he took our penalty on himself.

Yet, we are still subject to the assaults of the world, the flesh, and the devil, and we'll never be free from the stains of sin till we get to heaven, or till Christ comes again to take us to himself.

But he looks not just on the outside of our lives full of too many failures and stumblings, he looks at our hearts, and where he sees true faith, maybe tiny, weak, stumbling, doubting, but where he sees true faith, and true love, and true longings to be obedient and be like his son, he can indeed say of us that we are wholly following the Lord our God.

Our faith may be like that of the poor man who cried out, Lord, I believe, but Lord, help my unbelief. Our love may be all too often like that described by the prophet Hosea, like the morning mist, like the early Jew that disappears, and our longings after Christ's likeness may have been battered and bruised like those of Peter, who so horribly denied his Lord, and who could cry out, it sounds almost in despair, Lord, you know everything, you know, know, in spite of that everything, you know that I love you.

So, looking at what you've achieved in 2010 as a Christian or as a congregation, you may very well feel disappointed as I do, or despondent, or ashamed, but look to Christ, your Savior.

[36 : 53] Reconsecrate yourself today, this last Sunday of 2010, Reconsecrate yourself to Him today, and you can be sure that even of you, God will say, He is wholly following, she is wholly following, the Lord His God, the Lord her God.

And what a tremendous year, 2011, that will bring. And if it were true of everyone here, then, friends, there are no limits to what God can work among you, opening the windows of heaven to such an extent that there will not be room enough to receive the blessings that will follow.

Let's join in prayer. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Sophie. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

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