

“Promises”

Joshua 14:6-15; 2 Chronicles 20 ¹

The Hill Country in south central Texas is reported to be the most beautiful part of the state. I had a job offer there, once, but I didn't go to look at it (to the employer's consternation), so I've never seen that hill country myself. I do like that kind of terrain, though. Our house in Virginia is in that part of the Appalachians known as “Ridges and Valleys,” which I suspect resembles the Texas hill country . . . except we have bigger trees.

Our text this morning has to do with hill country, too. I invite you to follow along as I read Joshua 14:6-15:

*⁶ Now the people of Judah approached Joshua at Gilgal, and Caleb son of Jephunneh the Kenizzite said to him, “You know what the LORD said to Moses the man of God at Kadesh Barnea about you and me. ⁷ I was forty years old when Moses the servant of the LORD sent me from Kadesh Barnea to explore the land. And I brought him back a report according to my convictions, ⁸ but my fellow Israelites who went up with me made the hearts of the people melt in fear. **I, however, followed the LORD my God wholeheartedly.** ⁹ So on that day Moses swore to me, “The land on which your feet have walked will be your inheritance and that of your children forever, because you have followed the LORD my God wholeheartedly.”*

*¹⁰ “Now then, just as the LORD promised, he has kept me alive for forty-five years since the time he said this to Moses, while Israel moved about in the wilderness. So here I am today, eighty-five years old! ¹¹ **I am 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.** ¹² **Now give me this hill country that the LORD promised me that day.** You yourself heard then that the Anakites were there and their cities were large and fortified, but, the LORD helping me, I will drive them out just as he said.”*

¹³ Then Joshua blessed Caleb son of Jephunneh and gave him Hebron as his inheritance. ¹⁴ So Hebron has belonged to Caleb son of Jephunneh the Kenizzite ever since, because he followed the LORD, the God of Israel, wholeheartedly. ¹⁵ (Hebron used to be called Kiriath Arba after Arba, who was the greatest man among the Anakites.) Then the land had rest from war.

The central character in this text is Caleb, the son of Jephunneh, who was one of the twelve spies Moses had sent to reconnoiter the territory of Canaan when Israel first approached the land. You remember the story. After a forty-day expedition, the spies came back with this report:

²⁷ “We went into the land to which you sent us, and it does flow with milk and honey! Here is its fruit. ²⁸ But the people who live there are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large. We even saw descendants of Anak there. ²⁹ The Amalekites live in the Negev; the Hittites, Jebusites and Amorites live in the hill country; and the Canaanites live near the sea and along the Jordan.”

*³⁰ Then Caleb silenced the people before Moses and said, “**We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it.**”*

*³¹ But the men who had gone up with him said, “**We can't attack those people; they are stronger than we are.**” ³² And they spread among the Israelites a bad report about the land they had explored. They said, “The land we explored devours those living in it. All the people we saw there are of great size. ³³ . . . **We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them.** . . .”*

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on November 18, 2018, before Thanksgiving.

⁶ **Joshua** son of Nun and **Caleb** son of Jephunneh, who were among those who had explored the land, tore their clothes ⁷ and said to the entire Israelite assembly, “The land we passed through and explored is exceedingly good. ⁸ If the LORD is pleased with us, he will lead us into that land, a land flowing with milk and honey, and will give it to us. ⁹ Only do not rebel against the LORD. **And do not be afraid of the people of the land**, because we will devour them. **Their protection is gone, but the LORD is with us. Do not be afraid of them**” (Numbers 13:27-33, 14:6-9).

As you know, Israel rejected the exhortations of Joshua and Caleb, choosing to follow the counsel of the ten fearful spies, and so began the forty years of wandering during which all who refused to obey God’s command to enter the land died in the desert. After announcing this judgment to Moses, God went on to say something most unusual about Caleb in Numbers 14:24: “*But because my servant Caleb has a different spirit **and follows me wholeheartedly**, I will bring him into the land he went to, and his descendants will inherit it.*”

When I consulted a concordance on the matter of “wholeheartedly,” I discovered that Hezekiah claimed to follow the Lord wholeheartedly, and David told Solomon to follow the Lord wholeheartedly, but **Joshua** and **Caleb** are the only persons in the Bible about whom God said, “*They followed the LORD wholeheartedly*” (Numbers 32:12).²

It was this wholehearted devotion and obedience that caused **Joshua** to succeed Moses as the leader of Israel; and it was such wholeheartedness that sustained **Caleb** to be able to say in our text, ¹⁰ “*Now then, just as the LORD promised, he has kept me alive for forty-five years since the time he said this to Moses, while Israel moved about in the wilderness. So here I am today, eighty-five years old! ¹¹ I am 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.*”

¹² *Now give me this hill country that the LORD promised me that day. You yourself heard then that the Anakites were there and their cities were large and fortified, but, the LORD helping me, I will drive them out just as he said*” (Joshua 14:10-12). God had promised Caleb the hill country, and he intended to claim that promise!

As God had once told Jacob, who would become the Israel from whom the nation would take its name, “*I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you*” (Genesis 28:15). Caleb claimed that promise.

The Bible tells us, “*God is not human, that he should lie, not a human being, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill?*” (Numbers 23:19). Caleb claimed that promise.

Caleb had courage to take the hill country because he trusted God’s promises; and Caleb gave courageous witness to God’s faithfulness for well over fifty years, a faithfulness that gives us courage, too.

Later, as his death drew near, Joshua would tell the people, “*Now I am about to go the way of all the earth. You know with all your heart and soul that not one of all the good promises the LORD your God gave you has failed. **Every promise has been fulfilled; not one has failed***” (Joshua 23:14).³

² In the NIV, at least. See also 2 Kings 20:3; 1 Chronicles 28:9, 29:19; Isaiah 38:3.

³ And David would later write, “*The LORD is trustworthy in all he promises and faithful in all he does*” (Psalm 145:13).

On this Sunday before Thanksgiving, we're thinking about God's promises, and it's hard to do that this morning without thinking about the promises that Felicia and William made to each other before God, in this very room, yesterday afternoon. There is a sense, of course, in which their marriage ceremony involved entering into a legal contract, but a legal contract is not enough to hold the two of them together through all the challenges life brings. **A marriage that lasts a lifetime involves making promises and keeping them.**

In less than a month, Jill and I will celebrate 45 years of marriage. Many years ago, when we were going through a rough patch, Jill sought counsel from an older and wiser woman in our church in Louisville. After hearing what Jill had to say—and I'll have to admit that being married to me has been quite a bit harder than it has been to be married to her—the other woman, whose name was Jean, asked her, “**Well, when you promised ‘for better or for worse,’ did you mean it, or did you not?**” I continue to be very, very grateful that Jill is a woman who keeps promises!

There are many times in life when we face things that are harder than we thought they would be, and sometimes, we just don't know what to do. When such moments come to me, I remind myself of Psalm 15:4, where it is written that those who are righteous “*keep their oaths even when it hurts, and do not change their minds.*” Another translation says, “*who keeps his word whatever the cost.*”

One of my favorite stories about trusting God to keep promises is found in 2 Chronicles 20. You might want to refer to that chapter as I summarize the story for you. The situation was this: Jehoshaphat was king of Judah from 873-848 B.C. He was a good king who worshiped God faithfully, as his father Asa had done. Word came to Jehoshaphat that “*A vast army is coming against you from Edom, from the other side of the Dead Sea. It is already in Hazezon Tamar (that is, En Gedi)*” (20:2).

This situation was a bit like what the twelve spies had seen centuries before—a confrontation with what appeared to be overwhelming force. Jehoshaphat was greatly alarmed, and he proclaimed a fast for all of Judah while he went to inquire of the Lord. Jehoshaphat stood in the Temple and said this to God, “*LORD, the God of our ancestors, are you not the God who is in heaven? You rule over all the kingdoms of the nations. Power and might are in your hand, and no one can withstand you. . . . We have no power to face this vast army that is attacking us. **We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you***” (20:6, 12).

And God's answer to Jehoshaphat's prayer was wonderful indeed: “*Do not be afraid or discouraged because of this vast army. **For the battle is not yours, but God's.** . . . You will not have to fight this battle. Take up your positions; stand firm and see the deliverance the LORD will give you*” (20:15, 17).

From a human perspective, that was an extremely unlikely situation. There were no reinforcing military coalitions, no armored divisions to summon or air strikes to call in . . . *just God's promise to claim.* Jehoshaphat could have gone on fretting and gathering his forces as best he could, but he chose to believe God's promise. “**Have faith in the LORD your God,**” he told his people, “**and you will be upheld.**” And Jehoshaphat then mustered his troops to sally forth, putting, of all things, a *choir* in front of the army to sing praises God—ahead of time—for the victory that had been promised (20:20, 21-22).

As Judah's choir began to sing and praise the Lord, God caused the attacking forces to turn on each other, and “*when the men of Judah came to the place that overlooks the desert and looked toward the vast army, they saw only dead bodies lying on the ground*” (20:24). There was so much plunder that it took three days to collect it all, and “*on the fourth day, they*

assembled in the Valley of Berakah, **where they praised the LORD** (20:26; “Berakah” means “praise”).

I love that story; and when you and I have today what appear to be unconquerable mountains to face, Jehoshaphat gave us a pretty good model: (1) “*We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you!*”; (2) “*Have faith in the LORD your God, and you will be upheld*”; and (3), Remember to praise the Lord for the deliverance that comes.

The Bible contains many reminders to trust God’s promises. Here are a few of them:

- “*When I am afraid, I will trust in you. In God I trust; I will not be afraid*” (Psalm 56:3-4).
- “*For no matter how many promises God has made, they are ‘Yes’ in Christ*” (2 Corinthians 1:20).
- “*Let us hold unwaveringly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful*” (Hebrews 10:23).
- “*And this is what he promised us—eternal life*” (1 John 2:25).

You and I may not be asked to enter Canaan, to take Hebron and the hill country, or to march out to war behind a choir . . . but we do and we will face “mountains” of various sorts that tempt us to withdraw and hunker down in fear rather than to advance in faith. Some of us are surely facing such mountains even in this service.

My friend, as you sit here this morning, what is God calling you to do that you’re afraid to undertake? There comes a time when it’s time to quit living as if the purpose of life is to arrive safely at death. There comes a time when we stop allowing fear to determine our decisions, when we become willing to “get out of the boat” and walk on the sea toward Jesus.

On that most famous walking-on-the-sea night, when Jesus approached the disciples’ boat, walking on the water, His first words to them were, “**Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.**”

“Lord, if it’s you,” Peter replied, “tell me to come to you on the water.”

“Come,” he said.

Then Peter got out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, “Lord, save me!”

Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. “You of little faith,” he said, “why did you doubt?” (Matthew 14:27-31).

Despite this failure, and some much larger ones that came after that, Jesus didn’t give up on Peter. Jesus continued to shape Peter’s character and his faith until this same Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, gave courageous witness to the leaders of the Jews as Caleb had done long before:

⁸ “Rulers and elders of the people! ⁹ If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a man who was lame and are being asked how he was healed, ¹⁰ then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. ¹¹ Jesus is ‘the stone you builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone.’ ¹² **Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.**”

¹³ When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, **they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus** (Acts 4:8-13).

I suppose we shouldn't be surprised, because our Lord did promise that "**you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth**" (Acts 1:8).

¹ Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, **let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us,** ² fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. ³ Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart (Hebrews 11:1-3).

God told Israel as they camped at Horeb, the mountain of God, that "**You have stayed long enough at this mountain.** ⁷ Break camp and advance into the hill country . . . ⁸ **See, I have given you this land. Go in and take possession of the land** the LORD swore he would give to your fathers—to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—and to their descendants after them" (Deuteronomy 1:6-8).

So what mountain has God given you to climb? What country has God given you to claim? What task has God given you to accomplish? Will you do it?

Encamped along the hills of light,
Ye Christian soldiers, rise,
And press the battle ere the night
Shall veil the glowing skies.
Against the foe in vales below,
Let all our strength be hurled;
Faith is the victory, we know,
That overcomes the world.

Faith is the victory!
Faith is the victory!
Oh, glorious victory
That overcomes the world.

His banner over us is love,
Our sword the Word of God;
We tread the road the saints above
With shouts of triumph trod.
By faith they, like a whirlwind's breath,
Swept on o'er every field;
The faith by which they conquered death
Is still our shining shield.

To him who overcomes the foe
White raiment shall be giv'n;
Before the angels he shall know
His name confessed in heav'n.
Then onward from the hills of light,
Our hearts with love aflame;
We'll vanquish all the hosts of night,
In Jesus' conq'ring name.

Words: John H. Yates (1837-1900); Music: Ira D. Sankey (1840-1908)