

Caleb's Test and Achsah's Double Request

Joshua 15:13–19
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The fifteenth chapter of Joshua has three sections to it. Its first twelve verses describe the land given to the tribe of Judah. And beginning at verse 20 and going through the rest of the chapter, Joshua identified the cities of Judah. I won't be considering either of these sections this evening.

But between these two sections — verses 13 through 19 — Joshua gave us a little more information about Caleb, his occupation of Hebron and his family. The first chapter of Judges tells the same story. The biggest difference between the two accounts is that Joshua emphasized Caleb's activity, and Judges shows that the tribe of Judah served under his command.

The question here is, When did all of this take place? Did Caleb take Hebron shortly after Joshua gave him the land, or did he do it after Joshua died, as the book of Judges suggests? The former makes more sense to me. Otherwise, we would have to assume that someone went back and edited the book of Joshua to include it, and there would've been no reason to do this if the people already had the book of Judges. But if it first appeared in Joshua, the Lord repeated it in the book of Judges after Joshua's death to encourage his people to continue to take the land that God had given them, just as Joshua had instructed them.

So, what do we learn about Caleb in today's text?

Hebron and Debir

Verse 13 says, *And unto Caleb the son of Jephunneh he gave a part among the children of Judah, according to the commandment of the LORD to Joshua, even the city of Arba the father of Anak, which city is Hebron.* How this came about is in the previous chapter, so nothing more needs to be said here.

But the next verse gives us some new and helpful information. Here we find that the three sons of Anak — Sheshai, Ahiman and Talmi — had recaptured the city of Hebron after Joshua first conquered it. Caleb had to drive them out a second time. This is interesting because these are the same three men who were in Hebron when Caleb went there to spy it out for Joshua. Numbers 13:22 says, *And they ascended by the south, and came unto Hebron; where Ahiman, Sheshai, and Talmi, the children of Anak, were.* This showcases the Lord's wonderful sense of order. Caleb, having seen

Hebron and its three greatest warriors, returned and encouraged the people to go in and conquer the land. Forty-five years later, the Lord gave him an opportunity to do exactly what he said. He allowed Caleb to show the people that he was right: by the power of God, the people of God could rid the land of every evil influence. His confidence in God gave him the courage to do so.

Neither Joshua nor Judges provides any details about Caleb's conquest of Hebron. The main point is that he took it. God gave it to him, so it was his to take.

But Caleb didn't stop there. Verse 15 adds that he left Hebron and went up against the inhabitants of Debir, a city formerly known as Kirjathsepher, which Joshua had also captured earlier (Josh 10:36–39). Apparently, Caleb's territory included not only Hebron but also some of the surrounding towns and villages. Here we have details of his victory. Caleb didn't lead this battle himself; instead, he offered his daughter Achsah to whoever might smite it for him. His nephew Othniel, who later became a judge in the book of Judges, led the assault and won Achsah as wife.

This raises two questions that are inseparably connected. The first is, Why didn't Caleb go up against Debir himself? He was obviously capable of leading the battle. In the previous chapter, he said that he was as strong at eighty-five years of age as he was when he was forty. So, having taken Hebron, why didn't he go against Debir? The second question is, Why did he give his daughter away as a prize for courage? Modern feminists have a problem with this. Did Caleb think of his daughter only as a commodity to be traded? The same question comes up with Saul. After he enlisted David's military help, he said to him, *Behold my elder daughter Merab, her will I give thee to wife: only be thou valiant for me, and fight the LORD'S battles*. However, in this instance, Saul gave his eldest daughter to another man, and David ended up marrying a different daughter named Michal.

There's a very good reason why Caleb chose not to fight against Debir. He had already fought the hardest battle — driving the three giants and their army from Hebron. The taking of Debir was comparatively easier but still enough of a challenge to test the future leaders of God's people. He wanted to know who would step up as a leader. He wanted to know which of them would stand out as a man of faith in the power and grace of God. And I suspect that he had his eyes already on one particular individual, a man who was already interested in his daughter and in whom his daughter was also interested. Caleb seems to have favored this relationship. Thus, his test killed two birds with one stone, as they say. It established Othniel as a courageous warrior, worthy of leading God's people and marrying his daughter, and it demonstrated his love for Achsah. He was willing to go into battle to win her hand.

This is practical stuff. Like Caleb, the leaders of God's people should always be on the lookout for the next generation of leaders. Who in our congregation might the Lord be calling into the pastorate? Who would be a good elder or deacon? These questions are always on our minds. And

similarly, fathers shouldn't be afraid to test the mettle of potential sons-in-law. If they really want my daughter's hand, will they do x, y and z to get it?

But Caleb was more than an example. His story tells the historical progress of God's redemptive purposes, reminding us again that the ultimate fulfillment of our inheritance is salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. That's what everything is moving towards as we'll see more clearly in a minute.

Achsah's Request

Moving along, verse 17 says that Othniel took the city of Debir, after which Caleb gave him his daughter in marriage.

After this, Achsah urged Othniel to go to her father and ask for a particular field, perhaps as part of her dowry. The only information that we have about the property she wanted is in verse 19. Achsah called it *a south land*. She probably meant that it was a parcel of ground south of Hebron. This explains what comes later. Hebron was situated in the hills between the mountains in the north and the desert in the south. She asked for dry land, which she could enlarge by asking also for *springs of water*. Caleb gave her both the upper springs and the lower springs.

Achsah's role in this is a little confusing, though. Verse 18 says that she *moved* her husband to ask her father for a field in the south. A minute ago, I said that she *urged* him to do this. The two words mean the same thing. However, neither *moved* nor *urged* conveys quite the right idea. The Hebrew word usually has a negative connotation. It has more to do with scheming than planning. Some even translate it "nagged." And this suggests that there might've been something a little inappropriate, or at least unusual, about her request. Perhaps the inappropriateness of her request was that women, generally speaking, didn't receive hereditary lands. But if this is right, our text doesn't make a point of it. Caleb gave her what she wanted, perhaps even more than she asked for.

Another point that makes Achsah's role confusing is that, although she urged her husband to ask for the field, the next thing that we see is not that Othniel went to her father but that she did. Our text says that she *lighted off her ass; and Caleb said unto her, What wouldest thou?* So, did Othniel ever go to Caleb, or did he advise his wife to do it herself for whatever reason? We don't know.

Regardless of whether Othniel or Achsah asked Caleb for the land, it appears that there were two separate requests here. One was for land, and the other was for water. I say this because Achsah's response to Caleb in verse 19 shows that he had already given her the land; she went to her father again because she wanted to augment that with a source of water. She wasn't looking for luxury, but sustainability. Her family needed water to survive. And this shows that the command

Thou shalt not covet shouldn't keep us from seeking opportunities to improve our circumstances honorably.

But what kind of person was Achsah? Our text presents her as a Proverbs 31 virtuous woman. Look how she behaved. She properly recognized her husband's headship over her by asking him to present her request to her father. She didn't want to act on her own. She was also a woman of action. When she needed water, she went to her father and asked for it. And when she approached her father, she continued to honor him. She got off her animal as a sign of respect and reverence. You might remember that Rebekah did the same thing when she saw Isaac. Genesis 24:64 says, *And Rebekah lifted up her eyes, and when she saw Isaac, she lighted off the camel.* One commentator summarizes all of this by noting that Achsah “represents a woman who would not be denied her full inheritance. She is a model resembling the women of the gospels who sought out Jesus and refused to be turned back by the crowds and by Jesus' own disciples. As a result, they found salvation, healing and blessing for themselves and their families.”¹

So, Achsah's story is not about an overly bold woman who asked for more than she has a right to, as Calvin suggested. Rather, it reminds us that God takes care of our needs. If Caleb was generous with his daughter, will the Lord not be all the more generous with us?

It assures us, first, that God takes care of our ordinary needs. Caleb provided land and water for his daughter, a woman in Israel. What could be more ordinary and necessary than water? Caleb made sure that Achsah had plenty of it. He gave her two springs, not one. And what does God promise us? He says, *Therefore take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed? (For after all these things do the Gentiles seek:) for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things. But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you (Matt. 6:31–33).*

The Lord also provides for our spiritual needs — the forgiveness of sins, a righteousness that can stand before a perfectly holy God, and everlasting life. And he gives us all these things through his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Isaiah foretold this in the passage I quoted this morning, which I'll read again: *Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. Then shall the lame man leap as an hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing: for in the wilderness shall waters break out, and streams in the desert. And the parched ground shall become a pool, and the thirsty land springs of water: in the habitation of dragons, where each lay, shall be grass with reeds and rushes. And an highway shall be there, and a way, and it shall be called The way of holiness (Isa. 35:5–8).* Jesus is our

¹ Richard S. Hess, *Joshua: An Introduction and Commentary*, in *loc.*

stream in the desert of a world that still bears the marks of God's wrath. And this is exactly what he told the woman at the well. He said, *But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life* (John 4:14). Amen.