

# Sermon

**By: Rev Dr Jonanda Groenewald**

**Date: 21 October 2012**

**Place: Kirknewton/East Calder**

**Reading: Numbers 13:26-33**

The theologian, John Ortberg, wrote a book entitled *The me I want to be: Becoming God's best version of you*. He says that to become the person God wants us to be, is not just *one* of the things that we have to do while we are on this earth – it is our life calling. It is the reason why you were born in the first place – to grow, in order to become the person God wants you to be.

I don't know what it is like for you, but to me it sometimes feels as if there is a *huge* gap between the person I am, and the person I am supposed to be. Initially I found John Ortberg's advice on how to bridge this gap quite shocking, but after pondering on it for a while, I found it enlightening, and that is why I decided to share it with you this morning.

He says that we can bridge this gap by means of challenges, difficult circumstances and problems. He sees challenges and problems as the *tools* God give us to grow closer to him.

I know this sounds rather strange, because it is almost the opposite of what we traditionally think it means to be a Christian. Lots of people think that if you believe in God, you should effectively have a problem free life. And the

deeper your relationship with God and the more you pray, the less troubles you will have. And that usually is the focus of many of our prayers too – that God will bless us and keep hardship away.

We want easy, problem free, lives. But we never seem to come to a point where we are 100% contented with the way things are. Why? Because it is not good for us to never have challenges to face! Really! No challenges equal boredom.

Research has shown that the best moments of our lives are not the result of pleasure or relaxation. It doesn't have anything to do with going away on holiday or eating chocolates. The best times of our lives are those times when we are so caught up in an activity that time somehow seems to be altered, when our attention is fully focussed, but without having to work at it. It is when we are stretched and challenged, but without a sense of stress or worry, that we thrive.

And how does all this happen? Through God's Spirit working in us, giving us the means to handle whatever comes our way, and even the opportunity to enjoy doing it.

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Now, just like today, in Biblical times there were people who understood this concept, and people who didn't. And that is what our Scripture reading was about this morning.

God freed his people from slavery in Egypt, and he promised that he would send them to a place where they could be their own bosses, a land bursting with milk and honey. But although they had all this to look forward to, the road to this land was through the desert. And they *complained* all the way there... They even said that they wished they were still slaves in Egypt, because then – at least – their days wouldn't be as unpredictable...

And when they at last reached the Promised Land, Moses sent spies in first so they could prepare themselves for what lied ahead of them.

But what happened then? The spies said that God certainly was right, the land did flow with milk and honey, but the people who live there are large and powerful and the cities fortified, and there is *no way* they will be able to take over the land.

In other words – God promised them this land. He is right about how wonderful it is, but somehow he missed that the current inhabitants are big and strong. It is almost as if you want to say to these people: “*Hallo!* Where have you been for the last few years?” God has delivered every single promise he has made up until now, why would he stop doing that now?! Caleb was the only one who had the guts to say that he thinks they could manage it. He also saw the giants and the high walls, but to him that was a challenge and not a stumbling block. In any case, he believed that with God on your side, you can accomplish anything!

But, of course, the negative reports spread much quicker than the positive ones, and before long everybody rebelled against Moses and against God

– which ended up in another 40 years for them in the desert. God decided that if his people doesn't believe him and trust him, they don't deserve this land. 40 years was how long it would take a generation to die out. God decided that He would keep his promise about the land, but give it to the next generation.

So, 40 years later, the Israelites were *once again* standing on the border of the Promised Land. None of the unbelieving spies were alive anymore, but Caleb was still there.

Let's read Joshua 14:10-12 to see what his reaction was:

<sup>10</sup> *"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 desert. So here I am today, eighty-five years old! <sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup> 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."*

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Caleb was 45 years older now than the 1st time he stood on the border of Canaan. He spent 40 long years in the desert and another 5 years waiting for all the tribes to get themselves ready to take over this land promised to them by God.

He was 85 years old now. But he hasn't changed a bit. When he was a young man, he felt up to taking over Canaan, and if it is at all possible, he now felt up to this task even more.

He was strong, and he saw leading his tribe into the Promised Land at his age, as a challenge and a privilege. He looked forward to it, although he knew that it wouldn't be easy.

How did he manage to have such a positive attitude? Because he lived in a close relationship with God. And just like anybody who lives close to God, Caleb *prayed* before they marched into the land. And what did he pray?

Not: "God, please make this easy for me." No. He prayed: "God, please give me the hill country." The hill country? The most difficult part of the whole land to take in. The part no one else would have wanted, because it would be easy for the enemy to hide within the mountains and it wasn't easy to travel uphill and then downhill all the time. And the worst of all – this was the part of the land where the Anakites lived – the huge people who had made the spies feel like grasshoppers in their own eyes.

Caleb asks for a challenge, because he knows that with God on his side and enough adrenaline in his system, nothing would be able to stop him.

And he was right.

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*That* is the kind of persons we should be. People who make the most out of life. People who don't let themselves be put off by age or shortcomings or difficult tasks.

We have God's Spirit within us, we *can* do anything. It all depends on whether we *want to*. It all depends on our *attitude*. Whether we want to grow closer to God, or whether we just want to carry on living without any changes or excitement.

According to the psychologists 4 different things happen to you when you are faced by difficult circumstances, and you handle it (and don't just sit in a corner and feel sorry for yourself), namely:

1. Rising to a challenge reveals abilities hidden within you that would otherwise have remained dormant.
2. Adversity can deepen relationships. There is nothing that brings you closer to someone else than facing hardship together.
3. Adversity changes priorities. It is when you are down that you realize what really is important to you.
4. Adversity points us to the Hope beyond ourselves – it makes us realise that we are *nothing* without God.

So let us stop to keep on asking God to let everything in our lives go smoothly, because by implication we are asking God for boredom if we do that. Let's *not* ask for luxuries or comfort.

Let's ask for challenges. Let's ask for circumstances from which we can learn and through which can grow. Circumstances that will require us to

always be on our toes and give our best, circumstances which will help us to make a difference in the world.

Let us, just like Caleb did, ask God for a mountain. Because deep down all of us know that although it may be more difficult, it is much more fun to climb a mountain than it is to have absolutely nothing to do. Because that is just the way God made us.

John Ortberg says: *“God isn’t at work producing the circumstances you want. God is at work in bad circumstances producing the you he wants.”*

Your circumstances – even the nicest and best of your circumstances – are temporary. But you – the person you are – is forever. It doesn’t matter *what* happens to you, *you* will still be *you*.

May each and everyone of you this morning choose that that *you*, will be the person God wants you to be.

Amen