

Rev Tim Perkins  
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***“We went into the land to which you sent us, and it does flow with milk and honey! Here is its fruit. But the people who live there are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large...We can’t attack those people, they are stronger than we are...We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them.”***  
**Numbers 13:27, 28, 31 & 33.**

Dear Friends,

Last week I wrote to you to share some of the many challenges and pressures that we face at the moment as churches and as a circuit. They are daunting and will take a lot of prayer, time, energy, creativity and encouragement for us to face them and find a way through. We will need to think differently about the future in order for our churches to flourish. We will need to discern new visions for new ways of engaging with our communities. And we will need people with ideas, enthusiasm and faith to step forward and get involved.

All the challenges we face place before us choices about how we respond, opportunities that can be grasped, problems that can be solved and faith that can be developed. But the key word there is “choices.” How each and every single one of us responds, matters.

The words quoted above are taken from a fascinating little passage hidden away in the depths of the Book of Numbers. It occurs during the early part of the Exodus, after God has mightily delivered the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt. Fairly early on in their journey out of oppression they approach the Promised Land and God tells Moses to choose one of the wisest and bravest men from each of the tribes to send out to explore the land of Canaan and to bring back a report. The words above form part of the report that the spies brought back. At least they are the report of 10 of the 12 spies. They recognise the promise and opportunity that life in the land of Canaan might present, it is a good and fruitful place. And yet they are overcome by fear of the challenges that lay ahead. They were just too great, too big to overcome. It was the challenges, not just the inhabitants of the land, that seemed like giants to them. And I think we find expressed here one of the saddest statements in the whole of Scripture: “We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes.”

The problem was that they chose to look at the challenges that they faced through their own eyes. They failed to look at them through God’s eyes. They failed to remember the countless ways and times in which God had worked to deliver them, to feed them, to protect them, to strengthen them and to guide them. They failed to remember God! They only saw the challenge and their own feeble resources.

We can choose to face the challenges ahead in exactly the same way – to turn from them, to retreat, to long for the good old days (even though the good old days weren’t actually that great!) to leave God out of the picture, to rely on our own feeble efforts and resources. We can choose to do that. But it won’t bring us peace, it won’t give us hope, it won’t fill us with joy, it won’t stretch and grow our faith.

Faith needs a challenge to work itself out. It needs a hill to climb, a river to cross, a battle to fight in order to be exercised and to grow. Two of the spies in our story recognised that and one of them, Caleb, spoke. We are told: “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.'" Caleb knew that if the people only trusted in God and followed God's lead, then God would make a way. He was prepared to bet his life on it.

Sadly, for the Hebrews, Caleb's voice and vision and faith were drowned out and the people rebelled against Moses and against God. As a result, they spent the next 40 years living in a desert, rather than in a land flowing with milk and honey. Of the entire generation, only Caleb and Joshua, the other young leader who brought back a positive report, crossed the Jordan and entered the Promised Land.

The story helps paint a different picture for us. Rather than focussing on the challenges of having to sell buildings and how to cope with reduced staffing numbers, perhaps we need to focus on a picture that God might paint of what the new landscape might look like, what the good things might be that lie ahead if we choose to look at the challenges through God's eyes rather than our own. God has all the resources we will ever need to partner in the work of bringing God's kingdom into view in our communities. Some of those resources God has already placed at our disposal and we are actively using. Some of them undoubtedly God has already given to us but we have not yet realised it and some of them God will bring into view at the time that we need to be able to see them.

Yes, the challenges we face are great and they will require all the prayer, time, energy and creativity and encouragement that we can muster. We must be diligent in facing them and discerning God's way for us. But not a single one of the challenges we face is insurmountable when we remember who God is and what God has done in and through us up until this point. The real challenge is about our choice: who will stand back, give up, walk away, or take the easy option of worshipping somewhere else and who will step forward and take a positive view, roll up their sleeves and get stuck in through prayer, giving, serving, leading, preaching, encouraging? Who will choose the difficult path recognising that it is the only way to challenge and stretch their faith?

Problems and challenges often make us anxious and apprehensive. They can lead us to fear and drain us of what energy we have. But if we choose to allow the same Spirit that worked in Caleb to work in us, then in our hard work and diligence, in our prayer and our giving, in our serving and our leading, we will discover peace, we will have hope, we will be strengthened through joy and our faith will be exercised and only become healthier for it!

Every blessing,

Rev Tim