

Twelve Spies, Rebellion and Wandering

Numbers 13:1–14:45

Bible Memory Verse

Psalm 56:3

When I am afraid, I will trust in you.

Bible Story

Being in the desert was not optimal for the people (in their eyes). They deserved better (or so they thought) than what God was giving them. And who could blame them? They had been trekking in the desert on foot for a long time (possibly a year already), carrying everything they owned with them. Nowadays we have U-Hauls and Mayflower movers, but back then they did not. All they had been eating up to this point has been manna, which for a while was cool, but like all human reactions, once it gets old you want something else (i.e. meat & potatoes). So this is the state of the Israelite condition: they are tired, ready to enter the land, they want God's blessing now, they want to rest, but they do not want to obey to get it, as we shall see.

Enter chapter 13 of the book of Numbers. A casual reader would think, "Yes! We are finally getting somewhere. These miserable people are finally going to get a break!" And so they might.

Moses instructs each tribe (there are 12) to send a man on the exploration mission. The Scripture takes the time to name each one and from what family they came from. Two men are of special notation: Joshua and Caleb (file that away for future reference).

And so Moses, the commanding general, sends this elite team of men (i.e. US Navy SEALs) on a special operation mission. They are to go into the land undetected and get a sit-rep

(situation report) of the impending attack and occupation. So this team of highly trained Special Forces soldiers goes in to enemy territory. Their mission is to last for forty days and they are instructed to bring back with them some of the produce of the land (the weary people want to see what is coming). They are to ascertain what the land is like: if the people in it are strong or weak, few or many, the type of land it is, what the towns are like-walled or fortified, what is the soil like, fertile or poor, and are there trees or not. So they go in with their night vision goggles, tack helmets, and in two six man groups (in order to cover for each other). They last the 40 days without being spotted. These guys are to be commended! They return having fully completed the assignment with flying colors, even carrying a bunch of grapes on a pole with them. They return to their commander to debrief the adventure.

In the hearing of all the people, the twelve spies tell Moses and Aaron that the land was awesome! They had never seen anything like it. It does flow with milk and honey as God said (go figure), but. But. BUT!

(Uh-oh)

“But the people who live there are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large. We even saw descendants of Anak [giants] there” (Numbers 13:28). They were scared! And who wouldn't be scared when there are giants in a place!

But then Caleb (remember him?) silenced the people and said, *“We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it”* (Numbers 13:30). Now that's positive thinking!

“But the men who had gone up with him said, ‘We can't attack those people; they are stronger than we are.’ And they spread among the Israelites a bad report about the land they had explored” (Numbers 13:31-32). These guys were bound and determined to let the people of Israel in on their fear of the people in the land. It was like a virus that easily spreads. The people got infected hook, line, and sinker. The anti-bodies of Moses, Aaron, Caleb, and Joshua could do nothing to stop the rapid contamination of rebellion. The virus said:

“The land we explored devours those living in it. All the people we saw there are of great size. We saw the Nephilim there (the descendants of Anak come from the Nephilim). We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them” (Numbers 13:32-33).

Nothing like the virus of Satan and the seeds of doubt and rooting of fear in our hearts to lead us into a grand rebellion. And that is exactly what happened:

“That night all the people of the community raised their voices and wept aloud [uh-oh]. All the Israelites grumbled against Moses and Aaron [double uh-oh], and the whole assembly said to them, ‘If only we had died in Egypt! Or in this desert! Why is the Lord bringing us to this land only to let us fall by the sword? Our wives and children will be taken as plunder. Wouldn't it be better for us to go back to

Egypt?’ [triple uh-oh] And they said to each other, ‘We should choose a leader and go back to Egypt’” (Numbers 14:1-4).

They wanted to go back to slavery. They wanted to choose to be under someone else’s subjection rather than God’s authority. They would rather obey a Pharaoh than their LORD God. Striking!

Moses and Aaron fell on their faces to pray and intercede for the people’s rejection of God. Meanwhile Joshua pleads with the people:

“The land we passed through and explored is exceedingly good. 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. Only do not rebel against the Lord. And do not be afraid of the people of that land, because we will swallow them up. Their protection is gone, but the Lord is with us. Do not be afraid of them” (Numbers 14:7-9).

Joshua was looking at the situation at hand through the eyes of faith. He did not need to know how the Lord was going to lead them into the land, he just knew that the Lord would because that’s what he had promised. Joshua had spiritual eyes; he could see what others could not.

Well, what was the people’s response to this little pep talk from Joshua (Joshua is a Hebrew name, the Greek name for Joshua is Jesus)? “STONE THEM!!” was the whole assemblies reply. Amazing. The virus has hit its peak.

The Lord then responds to Moses saying that the people are treating him with contempt and he will destroy them with a plague and then make a nation out of Moses. But Moses intercedes for the people even in spite of their rebellion. Amazing. Sounds a lot like Jesus: “Father, forgive them for they know not what they are doing.” Moses reminds the Lord that he is “slow to anger, abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children for the sin of the father to the third and fourth generation” (Numbers 14:18).

In response, the Lord forgives them, but then pronounces the punishment for rejecting the Lord: the people who have seen the miraculous signs, those who have come out of Egypt, are not going to see the land that was promised. Instead, this rebellious company of people will wander aimlessly through the desert until the generation had passed—approximately forty years, one year for every day that the spies were in the land scouting it out. There is one exception—Joshua and Caleb will be allowed to enter because of their faithfulness and their trust in the Lord. Consequently, the ten men who explored the land with Joshua and Caleb were stuck down with a plague and died (Numbers 14:36-37).

The people responded with bitterly weeping sorrows. The next morning they repented and confessed their sin. They informed Moses that they would go up and take the land that God has promised. Bad move. Judgment has already passed. They had already rebelled. What made them think that the Lord was going to change his mind? Nothing. They had not even

consulted with the Lord about it. On their own they decided to go and take the land by their own force (and the Lord was not with them). Moses pleaded with them to repent of this determined action to enter the land by their own force, but they would not listen. Not until they were routed by the people of the land did they succumb to the lasting ordinance of God's judgment. And so they wandered. This time in the history of the people of Israel is often referred to as the Wilderness Wanderings.

Life Application

This story is a turning point in Scripture and is used throughout the Bible to portray absolute disobedience. The people were obstinate. They were bound and determined to believe the bad report and disregard the good. Not only that, but they subsequently refused to enter the land that God was going to lead them into. Bummer for them. They would all have to die and then their kids would get to see the glorious conquering of the land of Canaan through Joshua's humble leadership.

The issue in our hearts is almost always over slavery versus freedom. Do we choose to be enslaved to sin or abide in the freedom found only in Christ? However, even amidst the administration of freedom, we want to go back to slavery; often because we do not want to pay the cost of freedom: death. Death to ourselves; crucifixion, like Jesus. Just think if he did not want to pay the ultimate cost of freedom. Where would we be? Still wandering around in the wilderness.

When things are seemingly impossible do we immediately trust the Lord to carry us through? No, we do not. We wished we did in hindsight, but our forward thinking is not usually that smart. We try to do it ourselves (like the Israelites did). We try to rely on what we lowly humans can do, rather than trust the Almighty God. There is something about our human nature that naturally distrusts things that we cannot see. And that is the very thing that the Lord asks of us—to trust what we cannot see, faith. Faith is *"the confident assurance that what we hope for is going to happen...it is the evidence we cannot yet see"* (Heb 11:1 NLT). Even though the giants look really big and the land looks like it cannot be conquered without nuclear weapons, we need to trust and have faith in the Lord. I know that it is hard to model forward faith, but we must! Joshua and Caleb are examples to us of great faith in action. They trusted the Lord with their lives.

Review Questions

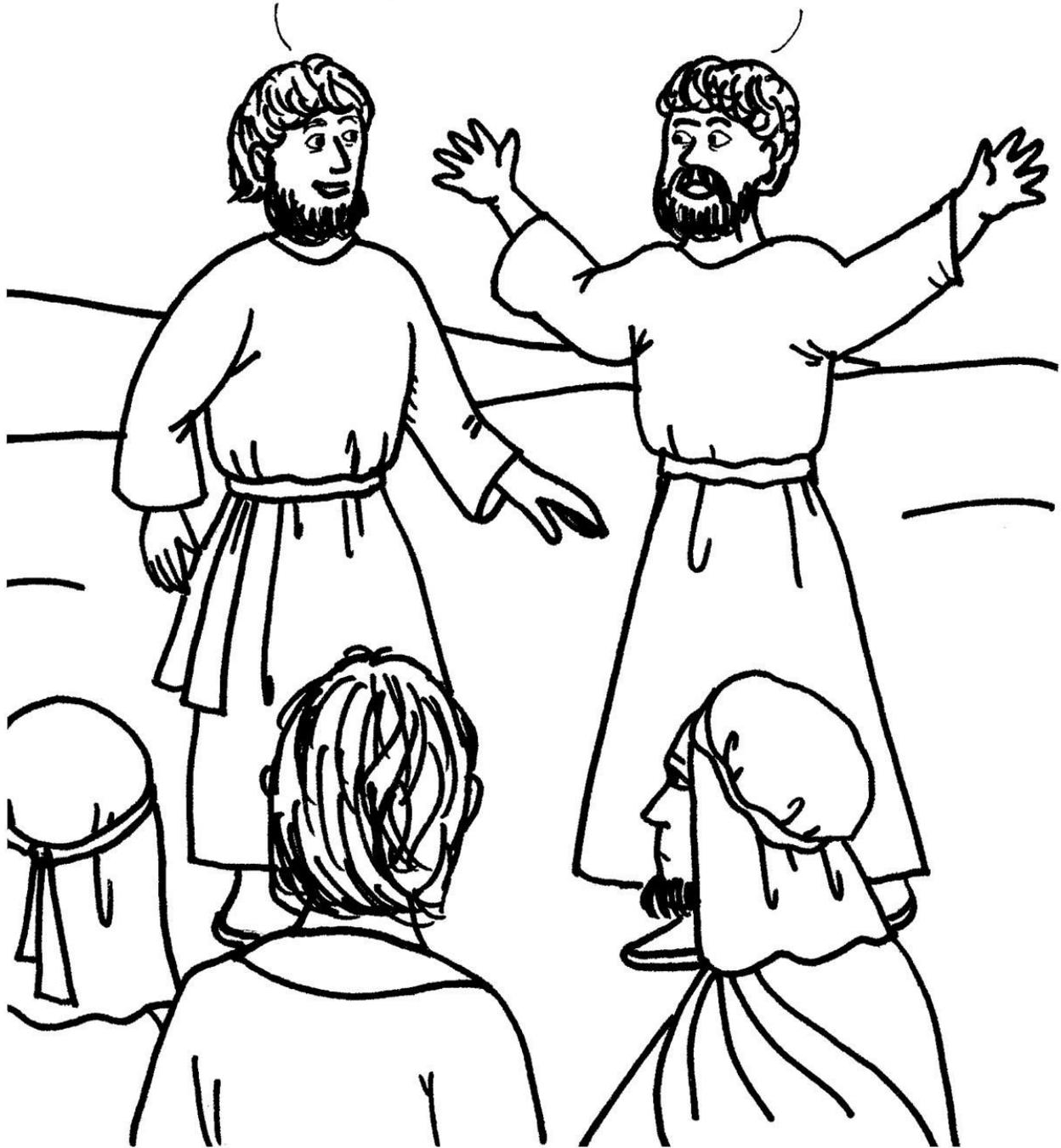
1. Why did Moses send the spies in to the Promised Land? To explore the land and determine what the land is like, what kind of people live there, what kind of towns, and what kind of soil, trees and fruit there are.
2. How many days did it take them to scout out the land on their exploration mission?
40 days
3. What good things did the spies say about the Promised Land? "It does flow with milk and honey!" It has amazing fruit: figs, pomegranates and grapes.
4. What frightened most of the spies? Descendants of Anak, because they were very large
5. How many spies gave a bad report? 10
6. How many spies gave a good report? 2
7. What were the names of the two spies who gave a good report? Joshua and Caleb
8. What later book of the Bible is named for one of the spies? Joshua
9. What did the Israelites do in this story that was really bad and had big consequences? They rebelled and did not want to go into the land.
10. What was their punishment for rebelling? They would have to wait 40 years to go in to the land (a generation would have to die before the LORD would let them in to the land)
11. Who were the only ones of this Israelite generation to go into Canaan after 40 years?
Joshua and Caleb

Coloring Sheet

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LET'S GO TAKE THE LAND.
GOD IS ON OUR SIDE - WE CAN
DO IT!

NO! WE CAN'T! HAVE
YOU SEEN HOW BIG
THEY ARE?



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