

The Book of Numbers

Lesson 8: The Twelve Spies and Israel's Unbelief -- Numbers 13:1-14:45

They were so close. Stand with Israel for a moment at the southern edge of the promised land. Behind them lay Egypt, the whips, the bricks, the Red Sea that had swallowed Pharaoh's army. Behind them lay Sinai, the thunder on the mountain, the covenant, the manna that fell fresh every morning. Ahead lay Canaan, the land flowing with milk and honey that God had sworn to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Twelve men go up to look at it, and they come back carrying a single cluster of grapes so heavy it takes two men and a pole to bear it. The land is everything God said it would be.

And then the report turns. Ten of the twelve start with the truth, the land is good, but they end with their fears. The people are strong, the cities are walled, the giants are there. We were in our own sight as grasshoppers, and so we were in their sight. Two men, Caleb and Joshua, stand up and plead: the Lord is with us, do not fear them, let us go up at once and possess it. But the crowd has already made up its mind. They weep all night. They talk of choosing a captain to take them back to Egypt. They are ready to stone the only two men telling them the truth.

Here is the hinge of the whole book of Numbers. Everything turns on this night at Kadesh. The issue is not really the giants, and it is not really the walls. The issue is whether Israel will trust the God who split the sea and fed them in the desert, or whether they will let their fears be bigger than their God. And they choose their fears. God, grieved and angry, pronounces the sentence: this generation, everyone twenty years old and upward who murmured against Him, will not see the land. They will wander forty years, a year for each day the spies were gone, until their bodies fall in the wilderness. Only Caleb and Joshua, who wholly followed the Lord, will go in.

We read this and want to keep our distance, but the New Testament will not let us. It takes this exact night and holds it up before the church like a warning sign: Today, if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts, as in the provocation. These people were redeemed out of Egypt, baptized in the cloud and the sea, fed with spiritual food, and they still fell in the wilderness through unbelief. So the Spirit says to us, Let us labour therefore to enter into that rest, lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief. This is not a lesson about people far away and long ago. It is a mirror, and it asks the most important question of all: do we really believe God, enough to follow Him even when the giants are real?

Group Discussion: What giants (real obstacles, real fears) tend to loom so large in our minds that they crowd out our trust in what God has actually done and promised?

Personal Reflection: Where in your own life are you standing at the edge of something God has called you to, hesitating because the obstacles look bigger than His promise?

Read Numbers 13:1–14:45

Study Questions

1. In Numbers 13:26–33 all twelve spies agree the land is good and flowing with milk and honey, yet ten conclude we are not able to go up. What was the real difference between the report of the ten and the report of Caleb and Joshua, and why does Scripture call the ten's report an evil report (13:32)?
2. The ten spies said, we were in our own sight as grasshoppers, and so we were in their sight (13:33). When have you let how you see yourself, rather than how God sees the situation, decide what you believed was possible?
3. Caleb stilled the people and said, Let us go up at once, and possess it; for we are well able to overcome it (13:30), and later he and Joshua insisted, if the Lord delight in us, then he will bring us into this land (14:8). What is the nature of the faith Caleb and Joshua displayed, and how is it different from mere optimism or self-confidence?
4. Caleb and Joshua had seen the very same giants and walls the others saw. What would it look like for you to face the same hard facts others face, yet respond with faith instead of fear this week?
5. In Numbers 14:1–4 the people weep, murmur against Moses and Aaron, and propose choosing a captain to return to Egypt. Why is wanting to go back to Egypt such a serious form of unbelief, and what does it reveal about how quickly redeemed people can despise God's deliverance?

6. Israel romanticized Egypt, the very place of their slavery, when the journey grew hard. What old bondage or former way of life do you find yourself looking back on with longing when following God becomes difficult?
7. When the people threaten to stone Caleb and Joshua, the glory of the Lord appears, and God says, How long will this people provoke me? and how long will it be ere they believe me? (14:11). What does this reveal about how God regards persistent unbelief, even from a people He has so visibly blessed?
8. Moses interceded for the people, appealing to God's own character and reputation (14:13–19). When you are tempted to give up on people who keep failing, or on yourself, how might Moses' example of intercession reshape the way you pray?
9. In Numbers 14:20–35 God pardons the people in response to Moses' prayer (I have pardoned according to thy word, 14:20), yet still declares that none of that generation, except Caleb and Joshua, will enter the land; their carcasses will fall in the wilderness over forty years. The New Testament uses this very event to warn Christians: these people were redeemed out of Egypt, passed through the sea, ate spiritual food, and still fell through unbelief and disobedience (1 Corinthians 10:1–12; Hebrews 3:7–4:11). In light of this, how should we understand the claim once saved, always saved, and what does it mean that Christians must take heed lest they fall (1 Corinthians 10:12; Hebrews 4:1, 11)?
10. Caleb is commended because he wholly followed the Lord (14:24). Name one specific area where Jesus is calling you, right now, to follow Him fully and not partially, and what trusting, obedient step that would require of you this week.

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: Hebrews 3:7–4:11, the New Testament’s extended warning from Kadesh against an unbelieving, hardened heart that fails to enter God’s rest.; 1 Corinthians 10:1–12, redeemed Israel as an example written for us, ending with let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall.; Deuteronomy 1:19–46, Moses’ own retelling of the spies and Israel’s refusal, with its causes and consequences.; Joshua 14:6–14, Caleb at eighty-five still wholly following the Lord and claiming his mountain.; Psalm 95:7–11, Today, if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts, as in the provocation.

More studies available on ChurchOfChristBibleStudies.com