

THE LIFE OF FAITH

We Are the Obstacle

SCRIPTURE TEXT: NUMBERS 13 – 14



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MOVING FORWARD:

I'm finding that I preach on the subject of 'faith' often in this pulpit. At first, this appears to be an accident, but the more I think about it, the more purposeful it seems (after the fact, of course). Nothing is more central to our response of the Gospel. And there is no more simple way of summarizing the life to which we are called as Christians. At the same time, nothing is more easily misunderstood and quickly forgotten. And so we examine faith through a familiar story.

NUMBERS 13.1-2; 25-14.10

^{13.1}The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ²"Send men to spy out the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the people of Israel. From each tribe of their fathers you shall send a man, every one a chief among them." ³So Moses sent them from the wilderness of Paran, according to the command of the LORD, all of them men who were heads of the people of Israel.

²⁵At the end of forty days they returned from spying out the land. ²⁶And they came to Moses and Aaron and to all the congregation of the people of Israel in the wilderness of Paran, at Kadesh. They brought back word to them and to all the congregation, and showed them the fruit of the land. ²⁷And they told him, "We came to the land to which you sent us. It flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. ²⁸However, the people who dwell in the land are strong, and the cities are fortified and very large. And besides, we saw the descendants of Anak there. ²⁹The Amalekites dwell in the land of the Negeb. The Hittites, the Jebusites, and the Amorites dwell in the hill country. And the Canaanites dwell by the sea, and along the Jordan."

³⁰But Caleb quieted the people before Moses and said, "Let us go up at once and occupy it, for we are well able to overcome it." ³¹Then the men who had gone up with him said, "We are not able to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we are." ³²So they brought to the people of Israel a bad report of the land that they had spied out, saying, "The land, through which we have gone to spy it out, is a land that devours its inhabitants, and all the people that we saw in it are of great height. ³³And there we saw the Nephilim (the sons of Anak, who come from the Nephilim), and we seemed to ourselves like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them."

^{14.1}Then all the congregation raised a loud cry, and the people wept that night. ²And all the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The whole congregation said to them, "Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! ³Why is the LORD bringing us into this land, to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become a prey. Would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?" ⁴And they said to one another, "Let us choose a leader and go back to Egypt."

⁵Then Moses and Aaron fell on their faces before all the assembly of the congregation of the people of Israel. ⁶And Joshua the son of Nun and Caleb the son of Jephunneh, who were among those who had spied out the land, tore their clothes ⁷and said to all the congregation of the people of Israel, "The land, which we passed through to spy it out, is an exceedingly good land. ⁸If the LORD delights in us, he will bring us into this land and give it to us, a land that flows with milk and honey. ⁹Only do not rebel against the LORD. And do not fear the people of the land, for they are bread for us. Their protection is removed from them, and the LORD is with us; do not fear them." ¹⁰Then all the congregation said to stone them with stones. But the glory of the LORD appeared at the tent of meeting to all the people of Israel.

UP THE HIGH DIVE

Israel here is the kid at the local swimming pool, standing on the end of the high dive for the first time and staring down into the water. From the side of the pool, jumping off the three-meter board looked like a great idea. But climbing the ladder his knees weaken, his bottom lip starts to quiver, and, even at an indoor pool, there's a breeze and the room gets colder. Slowly walking out on the board and looking down, reality sets in. The pool now appears to be a five-story drop. Gazing down into the waters below, 'jump' is the last thought in his mind. He slowly turns around as tears mixed with fear and embarrassment fall down his cheeks, and he slowly makes his way down the latter.

In these verses we meet these 12 tribes of freed slaves, a few months out of their captivity. God heard their cries in their suffering, and through miracle after miracle, freed them from their oppressors. As children they heard stories of Abraham and of God's promise to him of a land that would belong to his descendants. They had dreamed together about returning to this place they had never known. By this time it may have seemed too good to be true, but God had acted according to his word, and here they are.

At this point we begin asking the question, what would faith look like? Even for us, facing uncertainty and doubt—what does faith look like? Is it stepping off the end of a diving board into something that terrifies us, all the while hoping for the best? Is it, as some of said, a leap in the dark? The short answer comes in Caleb's first words concerning the land: "Let us go up at once and occupy it, for we are well able to overcome it" [13.30]. The call for God's people is to move forward, relying on the promises of a faithful God. But the actions of the majority here tell a different story. What is it that keeps them from moving forward into this "exceedingly good land?" What is it that keeps us from embracing the promises of God's blessings for us? God Himself declares that it's an issue of disbelief [14.11], but we need to understand the nature of faith through this story.

WHY SEND THE SPIES?

As chapter 13 begins, we see that the starting point of faith is God Himself. Faith does not begin with us. God speaking to

Moses and His command is simple: “Send men to spy out the land of Canaan” [13.2]. The starting point of faith is God’s voice—His call for us to follow. This tells us that there is content to faith. Theologians say that part of faith is “knowledge,” that there is content to what we believe, and that content begins with knowledge of God. In this case, embedded within the command, though is the promise: “which I am giving to the people of Israel” [13.2]. The knowledge of God set before Israel is that He has promised to give them this land. Their moving forward must be rooted in this promise.

Why send these men into the land? Moses’ command to the spies helps some—they are to examine the quality of the land and the nature of the opposition they will face in taking the land. For the practical among us, it makes sense. The initial report by the spies [13.27-28] appears to be an accurate representation of what they found. Hindsight may make us wonder if this was such a good idea—it only seemed to brew fear in the people [14.1-4]. But, if included in faith is knowledge, God is letting the people have an honest glance about what it ahead. He has promised this land to them, and this was to be a reminder of the goodness of this land as it lay ahead for them—they even brought back samples [13.23]. At the same time, this was also a reminder that conquering this land will not be without war, without bloodshed. There is a challenge ahead for them.

What’s in your path this morning? Where does faith seem like nothing more than taking a step into the dark? Moving forward by faith involves our pursuit of God Himself. He is the one who calls out to us; He is our guide. Deciding where to go to college, whether or not to take a new job, or even how to show mercy in a hurting world—none of these questions begin with us. They are not first ours to determine. God calls us to be faithful stewards, He directs us to love our neighbors as ourselves, and He draws us into a deeper knowledge of Him through it all. At the same time, God is careful through His word to warn us of the challenges ahead. Love will not be easy; it will not be without scrapes and bruises. There will be casualties. But this is the path of faith.

WHY WERE THEY AFRAID?

As we follow this passage, we quickly learn that, though the land “flows with milk and honey” and Caleb seems eager to lead the charge, the people of Israel are reluctant to enter Canaan. Why were they afraid? This question addresses what theologians speak of as “assent”: whether or not we hold the content we know to be true. Belief is not simply about an accumulation of facts, but it also involves whether or not we hold those facts to be true. When Caleb first spoke, he had to quiet the people as they responded to the initial report [13.30]. And after 10 of the spies continued in their report, the people cried, wept, and grumbled [14.1-2]. They had heard the stories of this land for generations but began to question whether or not these promises were true. What was in their way?

The spies reported to have seen people “stronger than we are” [13.31], who are of “great height” [13.32], as well as a land that “devours its inhabitants” [13.32]. This land flowing with milk and honey—abundantly fertile—has become something dangerous. And its inhabitants are described as the Giant race of men that existed before The Flood [Gen 6.4]. Even the stance of the spies initially declares this view; the land is no longer that which God promised to give them, but is now “the land to which you sent us” [13.27]. They reject whatever

knowledge they had of God’s promises in the face of fear and consider them unreliable, irrational, and simply false. The final assessment of the spies betrays their pre-occupation with their perspective: “we seemed ourselves like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them” [13.33]. Rejecting the truth of God’s promise, they resort to their own assessment of what the enemy must have been thinking about its foe.

For many, this is the question that burdens us. We know the stories of Scripture. We have our traditions. We have our habits. But is any of it true? In the face of the call to love and serve, we build obstacles, don’t we? We fashion them out of damaged relationships, misunderstood words, and even socio-economic status. We face very real obstacles every day: medical diagnoses, pink slips, and uncertainty about the future. These all make belief at time impossible. But what about we ourselves? Is it not possible that we become our own obstacles? Where do you find fear itself staring you down and keeping you from moving forward? I must confess my own fear to say this, but I must take ownership of my own trepidation before the unknown. This is why we must profess that faith does not begin with us. Further, we must also acknowledge that this is not an obstacle for God in accomplishing His will; but it does affect our experience of His blessing.

WHAT WERE THEIR OPTIONS?

At this point, with the knowledge of God’s promises and His honesty about what lay ahead, together with the challenge as to the truth of this picture, Israel chose to reject the promise altogether by rejecting the Canaan itself. Despite the pleas of Caleb and Joshua, the nation as a whole saw only two options. One was to stay in the wilderness, which would surely have killed them [14.2-3]. The second was to turn around and head back to Egypt, which to them seemed the best option [14.2, 4]. This gets us to the third aspect of faith is that of “trust” – embracing God’s promises as true with a confidence on which one’s life and hope is based. For Israel, because the truth of the promises have been rejected, there is no way the people would continue on their present course. The best they could see was turning around and heading back to the suffering they had left. We can see now where “faith” meets flesh and blood, earth and sky. The people rejected the truth of God’s promises, which twisted their perception of their entire situation, and led them into despair. They were their greatest obstacles to moving forward. But what is there for us?

Through this passage we see faith – knowledge, assent, trust . . . “knowledge passing into conviction . . . conviction passing into confidence” {John Murray}. God had spoken to this wandering and battered nation, He had promised them blessing beyond their understanding. It was a blessing formed in the mind of God, not simply for them, but one that would reach to the ends of the earth [Gen 12.1-3; Mt 28.18-20]. We noted early on that faith does not begin with us, as if it is something from deep within which we muster in order to proceed in life. Biblical faith, rather begins with God. At the same time, though, the message of the Gospel is that faith is completed in Christ—who stands as the “founder and perfecter of our faith [Heb 12.2]. He is the one who entered the uncertainty and chaos of our world and believed God’s promises fully and perfectly. The Apostle Paul reminds us in Christ, every one of God’s promises is “Yes” [2 Cor 1.20]. Truth is not up to us to determine, faithfulness is not first ours to achieve. The call goes out to us: move forward in the confidence of God’s promises.