

Wilderness or Promised Land

Numbers 13 & 14

Today I'm going to tell you a story. It's not a particularly happy story, but it's a true story about a part of the history of the Israelites. The story is found in the Book of Numbers in the part of the Old Testament known as the Torah in Hebrew or the Pentateuch in Greek. Actually, the names of all the books in the Old Testament that we have in our Bibles today are really Greek names that were assigned when the sacred writings were translated into Greek from Hebrew. We have been reading the book of Numbers for the last couple of weeks in our weekly reading plan that is in your bulletins each Sunday. I hope you are reading along and drinking in what God has to say to us through His Word. As we read Numbers, it is easy to see why it was given this name. The book is overrun with censures, gatherings, identifying leaders of the twelve tribes of Israel, and many other details that are accounted for using numerical representations. In fact, sometimes reading this book is somewhat boring and can bog us down. Then there are nuggets of truth and revelation or a story like the one we are going to look at today that are just filled with applicable things. If we were to look in the Hebrew Scriptures, this book would be called "In the Wilderness," and is documenting the Israelites journey in the wilderness after being delivered from the bondage of Egypt on their way to the Promised Land of Canaan.

Our story today is going to encompass chapters 13 and 14 in their entirety. In between the choppy lists and counting, we have this emotionally charged and detailed account. You see, the Israelites have traveled from Egypt through the Red Sea across the wilderness and have arrived at their intended destination. This could have been the end of their journey in fulfillment of God's promise to them. A smaller group could have made to this point in 11 or 12 days from where they started, but this group was much larger and ran into various stumbling blocks along the way, so their journey has taken them considerably longer. Never the less, they have arrived at the border of the Promised Land, the land that God has promised to give to them as a lasting inheritance. We will pick up the story in Numbers, chapter 13 and verse 1. Please turn there with me now....

READ: Numbers 13:1-3

The LORD said to Moses, "Send some men to explore the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the Israelites. From each ancestral tribe send one of its leaders."
So at the LORD's command Moses sent them out from the Desert of Paran. All of them were leaders of the Israelites.

God has instructed Moses specifically what to do. In addition, it is interesting to note that God said that He is giving this land to the Israelites. The promise has been made by God himself. It was something He had promised before this time to Abraham and the patriarchs. It had been a long-standing promise and now the people were at the door ready to receive the promise they had waited many generations for. In obedience to God's command, Moses selects 12 leaders of the people, one from each tribe of Israel. The list of names is different here, however, than from the first two times in this book that a leader was selected to represent each tribe. This time it may be that a younger, more energetic leader was required for spying out the land of Canaan. And the list of names is given for all to ponder. Among them is Hoshea son of Nun, whose name is changed to Joshua by Moses. Joshua would become the next leader under Moses. His original name may mean, "salvation," but his new name means, "the Lord is salvation." God had revealed His sacred Name to Moses and now this Name is an integral part of everything Moses does. So, he renames Hoshea to Joshua to show that it is God who brings salvation to His people.

So, Moses selects these 12 men to spy out the land of Canaan, the land already promised to the people but not yet attained. Interestingly, this territory makes up a little more than present day Israel. What has God promised you? Are you waiting to realize His promises in your life? Maybe you too are at the border waiting to enter in. Is something holding you back from receiving God's best for you? Do you believe that His promises to you personally are true and sure?

What was the purpose of them spying out the land? Let's look at what instructions were given to the spies on this mission. Look at **Numbers 13:17-20** ...

When Moses sent them to explore Canaan, he said, "Go up through the Negev and on into the hill country. See what the land is like and whether the people who live there are strong or weak, few or many. What kind of land do they live in? Is it good or bad? What kind of towns do they live in? Are they unwallled or fortified? How is the soil? Is it fertile or poor? Are there trees on it or not? Do your best to bring back some of the fruit of the land." (It was the season for the first ripe grapes.)

Why would God want the spies to see these things and notice these conditions? Was He trying to scare them by what they saw? **2 Tim 1:7** - *For God did not give us a spirit of timidity (or fear), but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline.* No, God was showing them a taste of the great deliverance He was going to work through them and in them. In order to receive the promises of God we need FAITH. Faith is built step by step as we experience God's hand at work in our lives. If these people could just walk in and take over the land on their own, there would be no Faith in God required, but that would not be the case as we shall see. Are there obstacles in the way of you receiving the full promise of God? For us and for these people, the only way to receive what God has promised us is to completely surrender our abilities into God's hands and allow Him by faith to fulfill His promises. Only God can overcome the obstacles.

So, for forty days they checked out the land, and they even brought a huge cluster of grapes back that took two men to carry on a pole. The name of the place where they got the grapes was called Eshcol – "cluster," proof that this land does indeed flow with milk and honey just as the Lord had promised.

Num 13:26-33

They came back to Moses and Aaron and the whole Israelite community at Kadesh in the Desert of Paran. (Where they were waiting at the border to enter into their Promised Land). There they reported to them and to the whole assembly and showed them the fruit of the land. They gave Moses this account: "We went into the land to which you sent us, (Who sent them? Moses? – No – God sent them into this land. The land is always referred to as "the land the Lord has promised to the children of Israel," but here it is referred to as "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 even saw descendants of Anak there. The Amalekites live in the Negev; the Hittites, Jebusites and Amorites live in the hill country; and the Canaanites live near the sea and along the Jordan." (The children of Anak were known for their height, in fact, the Hebrew word for "neck" is "nak" – Anak.)

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." FAITH!

Heb 11:1 - *Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.*

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. (Have you ever lost focus on the promise of God in your life because you listened to others who gave you a bad report?) They 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)." (The Nephilim are mentioned in Gen. 6:4 – A brief mention of when the angels mated with human women and produced giant-like people. Then as generations continued from this gene pool, the people retained this quality of being very large. They were the descendants of Anak and who had come from the Nephilim. This is the only other place in Scripture where the Nephilim are mentioned.)

We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them." (They only looked like grasshoppers in their own eyes. Once we look at the obstacles instead of the objective, we lose our faith and our confidence in God).

The story continues ... The people "lose it" at this point. They are completely discouraged and upset. Is this what they were delivered from Egypt to receive? Is this the great promised land they heard about for so long? The obstacles are overwhelming. They heard and believed the "bad report" rather than hearing and believing the God of promise. They grumbled against Moses and Aaron, as well as against God.

Num 14:2-4

"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?" 4 And they said to each other, "We should choose a leader and go back to Egypt."

Funny how Joshua steps up to address the people. He **will** be the new leader that will usher the people into the land of promise in the future. He and Caleb explain the truth to the people – the land is good and if God promised it to them then He will be with them to receive the promise. If God has promised it to you, then He will be with you to receive the promise. Let me say that again ... If God has promised it to you, then He will be with you to receive the promise. In fact, unless God is with us, we cannot receive the promise in our own strength!

Num 14:9

"Only do not rebel against the LORD. And do not be afraid of the people of the land, because we will swallow them up. Their protection is gone, but the LORD is with us. Do not be afraid of them." AMEN!

BUT – There it is again – unbelief, fear, doubt. The people talked about stoning them. Then God manifests His presence before them...

Num 14:11-12

The LORD said to Moses, "How long will these people treat me with contempt? How long will they refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the miraculous signs I have performed among them? I will strike them down with a plague and destroy them, but I will make you into a nation greater and stronger than they."

God is about to destroy the people because of their unbelief.

Moses pleads with God to be merciful and forgive their sin – yes – unbelief is a sin in God's sight. Moses explains that the people of the lands know that the Lord is active among His people and that He delivered them from the Egyptians by His great power. He was the only God to reveal His name to humans and to speak face to face. He is the only God to intervene directly on behalf of His people. The people of the land will think that God could not deliver His promise to them so He destroyed them in the wilderness. And, again, God relents from destroying the Israelites because of Moses.

Num 14:18 - The LORD is slow to anger, abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion.

He is faithful and will fulfill His promises to us. BUT - There is a high price for unbelief.

God forgives their sin, but there is still a penalty to be paid for those who experienced His miraculous signs and His blessings and then disobeyed and fell into unbelief. The Lord proclaims a great curse on His people. Because of their unbelief, for yielding to the obstacles instead of focusing on the objective, for not trusting in God's promise to them, everyone of them who were there at border to receive their promise would die in the wilderness and never experience the Promised Land. The 603,550 men that were 20 years old and up, would die in the very land they said, "devours those who live in it." God gave them exactly what they said. He sent them back to the Red Sea to wander for 40 years – one year for each day the spies who brought a bad report explored the land of Canaan. He didn't strike them dead immediately, but they would live out the rest of their lives short of God's best for them, short of His promised blessing. They realized they sinned, but then they decided to go in and possess the promise on their own. They still didn't get it! The story closes by the Israelites being beaten back as far as Hormah by the people of the land who were stronger than they. God was not in the battle with them. They again disobeyed the Lord. They acted on their own to make up for their error and had no more faith now than before. There's a high price for unbelief.

It was 1985, and I was riding the crest of my spiritual wave and relationship with God. I was called by God into music ministry and experienced His hand at work in my life. I dreamt of one day leading a church music ministry; I dreamt of one day preaching a sermon or teaching a study. I had a passion for God's Word and wanted to tell others about it, but there were giants in the land. An obstacle of fear stood in my way and it was stronger than I was. I could never get up in front of people. God was calling me to more, but I was afraid to possess the land. Then I received a bad report. It was cancer, and it was real, and it scared me more than anything else I ever experienced. When I recovered physically, I would not allow myself to recover spiritually. I drew my line in the sand in serving the Lord. I had focused on the obstacles rather than the objective. God's call and promise to me were real, and He would have gone with me to bring victory, but I chose to rebel because I really didn't believe that God would give me the Promised Land – His best for my life. So, I wandered in the wilderness. For 10 years I wandered in the wilderness. God did not strike me dead because of my doubts and fears, but I couldn't experience His best either. The Israelites were still God's people, but they wandered in the wilderness until they all pass on. We won't lose our salvation if we choose to focus on the obstacles, but we will not live in God's victory or in the center of His will either. After 10 years I realized I was in error and even in sin. I confessed to the Lord that the obstacles were too big for me to deal with, and He assured me that they always will be, but He will go before me if I just believe in Him. I had to put everything on the line, my life, my health, my family, even my marriage, my finances, and my future. The obstacles are real, but God promises victory with Him and defeat in our own strength. When I looked at the obstacles, I felt like a grasshopper in my own eyes, and would not step over that line. I was almost willing to wander in the wilderness until I passed on rather than enter the land of God's promise.

Where are you in your journey with God? Have you felt His call or heard and know His promise for you? Have you decided to enter the land of promise with God at your side? He is willing and desires to bless you and use you for His glory. Are you wandering in the wilderness allowing the obstacles to keep you from God's best? God does not call and then abandon us! He will never ask anything of us that He is not willing to bring us through – hand in hand with Him. We don't have to wander any more.

So the question is this, "Would you rather wander in the Wilderness or enter the Promised Land?" The choice is yours! We will not grow personally, and cannot grow spiritually as a church, unless we are willing to step over that line and walk with God. What is He asking of you today? And what will you choose,

"The Wilderness or The Promised Land?"