

The Land

GOD REQUIRES OBEDIENT FAITH IN THE FACE OF FEAR.

At the end of my junior year in high school our church planned a junior/senior day trip from our home in Albuquerque, New Mexico, to El Morro National Monument. This national monument, located about 120 miles west of Albuquerque, is famous as a large rock outcropping where travelers throughout the centuries have left their marks and signed their names. Everyone from Spanish conquistadors in the late 1500s to Native Americans leaving petroglyphs, to emigrants and soldiers moving westward during the 1800s, left their marks on the rock wall of this outcropping. In all, about 2,000 different people left evidence of their visits to this site.

Naturally as teenage boys, my friends and I took a quick look at the inscriptions and headed off to climb the rising rocks along the loop trail that ascended and then descended the heights of this imposing rock structure. Also typical of teenage boys, we lost track of time and soon realized that it was almost time to get back to the bus for the scheduled departure. We quickly began looking for a quicker way down the mountain than continuing on the loop trail to the base of the rocks and the parking lot. Lonnie, my best friend, thought he found a way to descend down the face of the mountain. Rather quickly he determined that there was no way to go down any further than the ledge that he stood on. It was still almost 200 feet of sheer cliff below him.

Our group shouted for him to come back up, telling him we would look for a different route. “I can’t,” Lonnie shouted. “I’m not sure I can get back up.” It was then that all of us became aware of the danger in which we had put Lonnie and ourselves. Only after much verbal guidance on where to place hands and feet, and the forming of a human chain holding ankles, arms, and hands did we successfully lift Lonnie back on top of the rocks. For an extended period of time, we all sat there and contemplated how close we had come to disaster. The taste of fear was in each of our mouths as we recognized the danger we had faced.

Fear is a part of life, at times even when it comes to being obedient to God’s guidance in our lives. Today’s session will focus on the account of

when the Israelites were on the edge of the promised land but their fears led the people to be disobedient to the direct command of God.



Numbers 13:1-33

One of the major themes of the book of Numbers is rebellion against God and God's leader, Moses. Chapter 11 details the Israelites' general complaint concerning the hardships they faced (Num. 11:1-3) and their griping about the daily miracle of manna (vv. 4-10). Even Moses complained to God about being burdened by leadership (vv. 10-15). This was followed by the complaint of Aaron and Miriam, Moses's siblings, against the exclusive nature of God's relationship with Moses (chap. 12).

This week's session focuses on a rebellion regarding the land God had promised to give the Israelites' forefathers—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This promise of the land was now an impending reality! God spoke in the present tense of the land "I am giving to the Israelites" (13:2). The command was given to Moses to deploy scouts to explore the land.

The account of sending out the scouts to explore the land is also told by Moses in a summary of the exodus event in the book of Deuteronomy. In that retelling in Deuteronomy 1:19-46, Moses indicated that the idea of sending out the scouts was initiated by the people themselves (Deut. 1:22). There in Deuteronomy Moses stated that he approved of the idea (v. 23). The summary in Deuteronomy and the account in Numbers do not contradict each other. The command of God likely came subsequent to the people's initial request.¹

God directed Moses to send out one leader from each ancestral tribe on this special mission (Num. 13:1-2). The twelve leaders from the tribes of the Israelites were chosen. Joseph's two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim (Gen. 41:50-52), made up two of the tribes (replacing Joseph and Levi). Note that this list is followed by a special statement concerning Joshua as one of those chosen (Num. 13:16; see v. 8, Hoshea). Joshua served as Moses's assistant. Why was Joshua singled out? Probably to mark him as a leader and a soon-to-be spokesman for God among the people.

The instructions of Moses to the twelve scouts were very specific (vv. 17-20): they were to scout out the land to determine the quality and productivity of the land, the strength of the inhabitants, and the type of fortifications in the land. This scouting was necessary because it had

been four hundred years since any of the descendants of Abraham had been in the land; this was all new territory to them. New people groups were probably in the land as well. Any information that had been handed down from generation to generation would have been outdated.

The area explored by the scouts reached from the Negev, an arid region in the south, through the hill country in the middle of Canaan, and reaching north to the area of southern Lebanon. This area is likely more familiar to us by the New Testament designations of Judea, Samaria, and Galilee. The scouts apparently traveled in late summer or early fall since they brought back some of the harvest of grapes, pomegranates, and figs (v. 23).

Chapter 13 closes with the return of the scouts and their report to the Israelites. Some said the land was good, but the possibility of conquering the people of the land was bad!



The Task Outlined (Num. 13:17-20)

As the Israelites neared Canaan, God commanded Moses to send out scouts to assess the land. Moses chose twelve men, one man from each tribe. He instructed them to assess the land, the people, and the cities. He also told them to bring back fruit.

VERSE 17

When Moses sent them to scout out the land of Canaan, he told them, “Go up this way to the Negev, then go up into the hill country.”

Many centuries had passed since God had promised **the land of Canaan** to the Israelites’ ancestor Abraham (Gen. 12:7; 13:14-17). The designation *Canaan* describes the land that lay between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River. The southern and northern boundaries have varied throughout history. Southward they extended most likely to the Brook of Egypt. To the north, the land of Canaan reached into Syria.

The scouts were to travel through two areas. First, **the Negev** (“dry land”) was a very dry region in the southern part of Canaan that extended into the Wilderness of Zin. Because of its location to the south of the main part of Canaan, the word would take on the meaning of “south.”

The Negev included Kadesh, the departure point for the scouts. Second, **the hill country** referred to an elevated ridge of hills between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River. The ridge is created by the natural rise of the land from the coastal plains opposite the Mediterranean Sea and the contrasting elevation change into the geographical trough of the Jordan River Valley which stretches for about seventy miles from north to south. The Jordan River begins at 1,000 feet above sea level on the slopes of Mount Hermon in the north, it runs south and ends at 1,300 feet below sea level as it enters the Dead Sea in the south. This creates the spine of elevation running throughout the length of Canaan.

VERSES 18-20

“See what the land is like, and whether the people who live there are strong or weak, few or many. Is the land they live in good or bad? Are the cities they live in encampments or fortifications? Is the land fertile or unproductive? Are there trees in it or not? Be courageous. Bring back some fruit from the land.” It was the season for the first ripe grapes.

Moses set forth a series of questions to which the scouts were to find answers. Note that each question was couched in a positive and negative answer. What were **the people** like—strong or weak, few or many? What was **the land** like—good or bad, fertile or unproductive? What were **the cities** like—spread out encampments or enclosed fortifications? What about the **trees**—many or none? God’s promise to Moses and the Israelites was that Canaan was a good land “flowing with milk and honey” (Ex. 3:8,17; 13:5). The scouts were charged with confirming that the land was in fact “flowing with milk and honey.” The statement **it was the season for the first ripe grapes** pinpoints the time frame for this reconnaissance mission as late summer or early fall.



Explore Further

Read the article “Canaan” on pages 256–261 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded* (see the map on page 257). What about the makeup of Canaan led to the Israelites succumbing time and time again to idolatry and immorality? What are some cultural influences that are temptations for believers today that can hinder our walk with God?

The Land Assessed (Num. 13:21-25)

The scouts explored the land from the Wilderness of Zin to Rehob. They gathered grapes, pomegranates, and figs, returning after forty days.

VERSE 21

So they went up and scouted out the land from the Wilderness of Zin as far as Rehob near the entrance to Hamath.

The twelve scouts departed from the **Wilderness of Zin**, a region stretching from Kadesh-barnea northward to the Dead Sea. This desert area formed the southern border of Canaan and later would be the southern limit of the tribal allotment to Judah. The forty-day journey of the scouts took them to the northern reaches of Canaan to the area of **Rehob**. The exact location of Rehob is unknown, but it was identified as being near **Hamath** which was a city-state located in the valley of the Orontes River about 120 miles north of Damascus. In all, the scouts traveled somewhere between 350 to 500 miles in their exploration of Canaan.²

VERSE 22

They went up through the Negev and came to Hebron, where Ahiman, Sheshai, and Talmi, the descendants of Anak, were living. Hebron was built seven years before Zoan in Egypt.

The narrative of the travels of the twelve scouts singled out the major city of **Hebron**. Hebron was a leading city in the hill country of Canaan and was located approximately nineteen miles south of Jebus (Jerusalem). Hebron played a major role in the sojourning of Abraham in Canaan. Abraham camped near the oaks of Mamre at Hebron (Gen. 13:18). He may have lived there for some time after separating from Lot and his household (chap. 13). Hebron was also known as Kiriath-arba. It was here that Sarah died (23:2). Abraham bought a field with a cave “at Machpelah near Mamre (that is, Hebron)” (vv. 17-20) in which to bury Sarah. Later this cave would serve as the burial place for Abraham, Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob, and Leah.

Ahiman, Sheshai, and Talmi, leaders of the clans of the **descendants of Anak**, were living in the hill country and Hebron. The Hebrew term *Anak* means “long necked” or “strong necked” and was both the name of a person and the name of the clans in his lineage. Anak most likely served as a reference to the height of Anak’s descendants. These especially tall men (“men of great size,” Num. 13:32) were the

giants that produced fear among the ten scouts upon their return. When Caleb later received the region as his inheritance, he drove out these three particular clans (Josh. 14:12; 15:13-14). The Anakim were also dwelling in the coastal plain in Gaza, Gath, and Ashdod (11:21-22).

The city of **Zoan**, the Egyptian city of Tanis, was located about one hundred miles north of Cairo on a branch of the Nile River. According to the reference, Hebron was **seven years** older than Zoan. Zoan was the capital of Egypt from 1070 BC until 655 BC. No exact date is known for the founding of these two cities, but both were ancient communities.

VERSES 23-24

When they came to Eshcol Valley, they cut down a branch with a single cluster of grapes, which was carried on a pole by two men. They also took some pomegranates and figs. That place was called Eshcol Valley because of the cluster of grapes the Israelites cut there.

One of the prominent features of the journey of the Israelite scouts were the **pomegranates** and **figs**, and the huge **cluster of grapes** brought back as samples of the productivity of the land they explored. The cluster of grapes was so large that it was **carried on a pole by two men**. The harvest of the grape cluster appears to have played into the naming of the place where the grapes grew, **Eshcol Valley**. The *Eshcol Valley* is literally translated “cluster [of grapes].” Obviously, it was a region wholly suited for growing grapes. However, the name of the valley may reach back to the time of Abraham. *Eshcol* was also the name of an ally of Abraham while the patriarch was living near the oaks of Mamre at Hebron (Gen. 14:13). The Eshcol Valley may have been in the vicinity of Hebron.

VERSE 25

At the end of forty days they returned from scouting out the land.

The twelve scouts returned **at the end of forty days**. The term *forty days* frequently appears in the Bible in relation to significant events. For example, during the flood it rained on the earth forty days and forty nights (Gen. 7:4,12). Moses was on Mount Sinai with God for forty days and forty nights (Ex. 24:18; 34:28). Before His temptation, Jesus fasted for forty days and forty nights (Matt. 4:2). If the scouting mission covered about 500 miles, the scouts would have covered around ten to twelve miles per day traveling by foot through the region.



Explore Further

Read the article “Anak, Anakim, Anakites” on page 63 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. The giants dwelling in Canaan created great fear among the Israelites. What are some metaphorical giants in your life that you struggle with? Spend some time in prayer asking God to enable you to face those “giants” in His strength as you wrestle with them.

The Decision at Hand (Num. 13:26-31)

The scouts reported back to Moses about the land and its fruitfulness. They also recounted that the cities were well fortified with strong people living in them. Still, Caleb declared that they should go and take possession of the land at that time, certain of their ability to conquer it. The other scouts disagreed, saying they should not attack due to the strength of the current inhabitants.

VERSE 26

The men went back to Moses, Aaron, and the entire Israelite community in the Wilderness of Paran at Kadesh. They brought back a report for them and the whole community, and they showed them the fruit of the land.

After their reconnaissance mission, the twelve scouts returned to the Israelite encampment at **Kadesh** in the **Wilderness of Paran**. The Israelites’ encampment at Kadesh sat between the Wilderness of Zin (v. 21) to the northwest and the Wilderness of Paran to the south and east. Kadesh was one of the few oases in this region that had abundant water.

VERSE 27

They reported to Moses, “We went into the land where you sent us. Indeed it is flowing with milk and honey, and here is some of its fruit.”

The scouts confirmed Canaan was a land **flowing with milk and honey** as God had promised (Ex. 3:8). The phrase *flowing with milk and honey* is

used about twenty times to describe Canaan. No doubt the twelve scouts found this description to be true and brought back some of Canaan's **fruit**. But for ten of them, there was a giant problem!

VERSE 28

“However, the people living in the land are strong, and the cities are large and fortified. We also saw the descendants of Anak there.”

However, ten of the scouts saw major problems that outweighed the benefits and bounty of the land. **The people living in the land are strong**. The Hebrew word for *strong* speaks of fierceness and strength. Furthermore, **the cities are large and fortified**. The Hebrew term for *fortified* means something that is inaccessible or cut off. From the ten scouts' perspective, the cities were full of strong people and had walls of fortification that would have made capturing the cities very difficult if not impossible. In other words, the beauty and productivity of the land paled in comparison to the dangers that awaited them and the seemingly impossible task at hand.

VERSE 29

“The Amalekites are living in the land of the Negev; the Hethites, Jebusites, and Amorites live in the hill country; and the Canaanites live by the sea and along the Jordan.”

To reinforce their negative assessment the ten scouts next began to list all the foes in the land that the Israelites would face. The **Amalekites** were the descendants of Esau (Gen. 36:12) and were a people who lived a nomadic life in the wilderness of the northwestern section of the Sinai Peninsula and also the Negev in the southern part of Canaan. The Israelites had engaged the Amalekites in battle at Rephidim in the early part of the exodus before they had reached Mount Sinai (Ex. 17:8-16). It would be the Amalekites in partnership with the Canaanites who would repulse the Israelites' belated attempt to enter the promised land after God had passed judgment on their initial refusal to enter Canaan (Num. 14:39-45).

Little is known about the **Hethites**, other than they appear to have been descendants of Heth, descendant of Noah by Canaan (Gen. 10:15). Abraham bought his burial plot for Sarah from the Hethites (23:3-20).

The **Jebusites** were the original inhabitants of Jerusalem or, as it was originally called, Jebus. The Israelites waged war against the Jebusites throughout the years but never fully drove them out. David conquered

the city of Jebus, fortified it and made it his capital (2 Sam. 5:6-7; 1 Chron. 11:4-8). David also bought the future site of Solomon's temple from Araunah the Jebusite (2 Sam. 24:18-25; 2 Chron. 3:1).

The **Amorites** perhaps were the most formidable opponents for Israel as they sought to conquer the promised land. Originally from Syria, these semi-nomadic tribes migrated into Mesopotamia and Canaan beginning around 2000 BC. In their journey to Canaan, the Israelites first encountered the Amorites on the east side of the Jordan Valley as they approached the promised land. In the battles that followed, the Israelites defeated the two Amorite kings Sihon and Og (Num. 21:21-35). Israel would battle various groups of Amorites on the west side of the Jordan as well.

The last group mentioned were the **Canaanites**. In this verse, the designation *Canaanites* is limited to the region “by the sea [the coastal plains] and along the Jordan.” While that might be where the scouts encountered them, the fact is that the term *Canaanites* was often used generically for all of the inhabitants of Canaan. In similar fashion, the term *Amorites* was sometimes used to identify all who lived in Canaan as well. Often the term *Canaanites* was used as synonymous with *Amorites*. This would include other people groups not mentioned here in Numbers 13 such as the Girgashites, Perizzites, and Hivites (Deut. 7:1).

VERSE 30-31

Then Caleb quieted the people in the presence of Moses and said, “Let’s go up now and take possession of the land because we can certainly conquer it!” But the men who had gone up with him responded, “We can’t attack the people because they are stronger than we are!”

Caleb was first introduced in the list of the twelve scouts (v. 6). Caleb, a leader from the tribe of Judah, and along with Joshua from the tribe of Ephraim (Hoshea, v. 8) refuted the negative report of the ten scouts who spoke against entering the promised land. Caleb emerged as the spokesman for the two and urged **the people** to be obedient to God and depend on God’s power to conquer these daunting foes. He reminded them that God promised to give the people the land, and God could be trusted to deliver on His promise (14:6-9). Because of his vocal faith in God, Caleb along with Joshua were the only two among the scouts that were allowed to enter the promised land (v. 24). In fact, Caleb was given a special allotment in the region of Hebron where he settled and began his own clan (Josh. 14:6-15). The testimony concerning Caleb is given in Joshua 14:14—

“He followed the LORD, the God of Israel, completely.” Amazingly, Caleb conquered the city of Hebron and ran out the three clans of Anak living in the region at the age of eighty-five (14:6-14; 15:13-14).

Caleb’s confidence, of course, was not in himself. Although he refuted the negative report of the ten scouts when he said, **“We can certainly conquer it!”** Caleb was very aware that it would only be through God’s power that they would conquer the various people groups in Canaan. After all, God had promised to give the children of Israel this land; God would fulfill that promise (Num. 14:7-9). Caleb (and Joshua) stood on the Word of God and the promise He gave. In next week’s session from Numbers 14, we will discover more about the faith and confidence of Caleb and Joshua. They both had learned that obedience was essential, even when facing seemingly dangerous situations.

In contrast, the other ten scouts held to their negative report. **“We can’t attack the people because they are stronger than we are!”** From a purely human perspective what these scouts said was true. They were motivated by fear and not faith. In their fear, the ten scouts and the Israelites in general forgot or chose to ignore how God had miraculously provided for and protected them throughout their journey from Egypt to the promised land. Their refusal to move forward in faith and enter Canaan was ultimately a rebellion against God. They allowed their fears to override their faith in God, and there would be consequences for their choice.



Explore Further

Fear can be a powerful emotion. At times it can surge so fast that it catches us off guard and gives us tunnel vision so we are momentarily unable to see and think about anything but our fears. Overwhelmed, like the Israelites we can be in danger of making rash decisions. During such times we need to choose faith in God over fear of our current circumstances. We need to focus on God, whom we know and can depend upon, rather than only on how we feel—afraid. Memorize some favorite Bible passages that speak to you about the certainty of God’s love, provision, and protection so that you can draw upon them and their truths to help you trust in God in such times of fear.

1. R. Dennis Cole, *Numbers*, vol. 3B, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 2000), 216.
2. *Ibid.*, 221.