

SESSION 3

The Land

NUMBERS 13:17-31

GOD REQUIRES OBEDIENT FAITH IN THE FACE OF FEAR.



Have you ever noticed how a project grows? You decide to clean out the backyard shed, the garage, or the closet. You are going to put down new liner paper in the kitchen cabinets. You are going to paint the kids' bedroom. You figure out how long it will take and can visualize what it will look like when you're finished. You begin—excited. But about halfway through, you say, “What was I thinking? This is a lot more complicated than I thought it would be.”

*WHAT WAS THE LAST PROJECT YOU HAD THAT WAS MORE COMPLICATED
THAN YOU THOUGHT IT WOULD BE?*

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

Moses led God's people out of Egyptian bondage. They passed through the Red Sea and arrived at the southern tip of the Sinai Peninsula at Mount Sinai. They stayed there for about a year while Moses met with God on the mountain. Afterward, they traveled up the eastern side of the Sinai Peninsula. To their right was the body of water known today as the Gulf of Aqaba. It separates the peninsula from Saudi Arabia. They came to the northern end of the Gulf of Aqaba and continued northward through the Wilderness of Paran. In this context, “wilderness” means a vast desert land uninhabitable due to a lack of water and resources. The Israelites' trek continued to Kadesh (also called “Kadesh-barnea”). This oasis was between the Wilderness of Paran and the Wilderness of Zin. Moses and the Israelites remained in Kadesh while the spies went into Canaan, the land God promised to Abraham.

The climate and resources of Canaan were dramatically different from what the people had experienced before. A huge issue was water. Egypt had a major river system that fed canals and irrigation fields, making food

production possible. Not so with Canaan. The Canaanites depended on rainy periods to provide growing seasons for crops. The promised land had (and still has) essentially two seasons. Winter is cool and rainy. Summer, which lasts from mid-May to mid-October, is hot and receives no rain. The “early rains” break the annual drought and allow the farmers to work the fields and plant crops. The rain continues. About seventy percent of the annual rain falls from December to February. The “latter rains” come in March and April. In late summer the wheat and barley would have already been harvested. Workers would be harvesting grapes, figs, and almonds; olives would be visible on the trees but not yet ready for gathering.



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. **18** See what the land is like, and whether the people who live there are strong or weak, few or many. **19** Is the land they live in good or bad? Are the cities they live in **encampments or fortifications**? **A** **20** 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. **21** So they went up and scouted out the land from the **Wilderness of Zin** **B** as far as Rehob near the entrance to **Hamath**. **C** **22** They went up through the Negev and came to **Hebron**, **D** where Ahiman, Sheshai, and Talmi, the **descendants of Anak**, **E** were living. Hebron was built seven years before Zoan in Egypt. **23** 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. **24** That place was called Eshcol Valley because of the cluster of grapes the Israelites cut there. **25** At the end of **forty days** **F** they returned from scouting out the land. **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. **27** They reported to Moses, “We went into the land where you sent us. Indeed it is **flowing with milk and honey**, **G** and here is some of its fruit. **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. **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.” **30** Then Caleb quieted the people in the presence of Moses and said, “Let’s go up now and **take possession** **H** of the land because we can certainly conquer it!” **31** But the men who had gone up with him responded, “We can’t attack the people because they are stronger than we are!”

A. The spies were to assess the military strength of the inhabitants. Fortifications were more permanent, like a city wall, while encampments were weaker.

B. A rocky desert that stretched from Kadesh-barnea to the Dead Sea. It formed part of the southern border of Canaan and later Judah (Num. 34:3-4).

C. The term regularly described the northern border of Israel (Num. 34:7-8).

D. An ancient city in the hill country of Judah where Abram sojourned (Gen. 13:18) and purchased a cave to bury Sarah. Caleb asked that the city be deeded to him during the conquest forty years later (Josh. 14:12).

E. Anak was the patriarch of a clan of giants who were also known as Nephilim (Gen. 6:4; Num. 13:33).

F. Later, Israel would spend forty years in the wilderness, one year for every day of the spies’ mission (Num. 14:34).

G. A metaphorical statement describing a land abundant in its agricultural bounty. “Milk” refers to an abundance of cattle, and “honey” refers to an abundance of food.

H. Ten spies saw only obstacles, while Caleb saw opportunities. The majority opinion, moved by fear, won out (v. 31).

EXPLORE THE TEXT

1. The Task Outlined

(Num. 13:17-20)

Believers can depend on God to instruct them in the tasks He has for them.

- **What was significant about the land of Canaan?**
- **What do you imagine the spies were thinking while Moses explained the information he wanted them to bring back?**
- **What would have caused them to be afraid?**

2. The Land Assessed

(Num. 13:21-25)

Obedience to God includes understanding what He is calling us to do.

- **How do we balance acting in faith with gathering information before acting?**

3. The Decision at Hand

(Num. 13:26-31)

Believers can face obstacles with faith, knowing that God is with them.

- **What kind of obstacles might prevent or delay us from obeying God?**

Apply the Text

- **What new ministry opportunity has the Lord put in front of your Bible study group?**
- **What actions (if any) have you taken to begin?**
- **What steps can you take to start implementing this ministry opportunity?**

KEY DOCTRINE:

God the Father

God is all powerful, all knowing, all loving, and all wise. (See 2 Timothy 1:7; 2 Peter 1:3.)

BIBLE SKILL:

Use multiple Scripture passages to better understand a Bible passage.

Review Numbers 13:27-31. Where does the unbelief show itself? Read Joshua 21:43-45 and 2 Corinthians 1:20. What do these verses reveal about God and His faithfulness to His promises? How should these verses guide us when we face challenging circumstances?

TALK IT OUT

Focus on Numbers 13:30. Think of an example when the majority opinion was wrong.

The scouts sent by Moses reported back about the land and its fruitfulness. They said the land was good and its produce abundant. But they also reported that the cities were large and well fortified, and the people living in those cities were strong. Ten of the spies were of the opinion that the odds were stacked against them—there was no way the Israelites could conquer the land.

When have you struggled in choosing between faith and fear? When did fear win? When did faith win?

Caleb and Joshua were the only scouts who believed the Israelites should go up and conquer the land. They had seen the same challenges the other scouts saw. But instead of focusing on the obstacles, they focused on God's promises. The Canaanites were big, but God was bigger. The other scouts continued to insist that the obstacles were too great. Their fear overwhelmed their faith.

What difference will it make in your week if you focus on God more than on your circumstances?

Place Numbers 13:30 on your phone or a card and agree to memorize it this week.

Prayer Requests / Notes

DAILY EXPLORATION



Day 1: Numbers 13:17-20

Consider why Moses needed to tell the spies to “be courageous.”

Moses revealed to the spies his two primary concerns: the land and the people. What was the land like? How densely was it populated? Were the people “strong or weak”? Were they “few or many”? Was the land “good or bad”? Certainly, Moses knew the land was good. God told him at the burning bush that He would bring them “to a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey” (Ex. 3:8). Was Moses asking if God could be trusted to keep His word? No, the exact opposite. This detail would prove that God had kept His promise.

Moses asked about cities. Were they fortified, meaning walled? Was the land “fertile” or unproductive”? If the land were fertile, it would supply enough food to support the Israelite military and their families. That would mean a variety of foods and no more manna. The “trees” Moses mentioned would have been fruit-bearing. Bringing back fruit would prove what the land was like, whether it was fertile or not.

The instruction to “be courageous” in verse 20 can also mean “be determined.” This meant the spies had to be single-minded and tenacious about their task. Courage would be essential—especially if the Canaanites were strong and their cities were fortified.

What task or responsibility has God given you that requires courage or determination?



Day 2: Numbers 13:21-22

Compare these verses to verse 17.

The word “so” links the instructions in the previous verses with the actions described next. They “went up” and “scouted out,” exactly as Moses had told them to do (v. 17).

The “Wilderness of Zin” was the southern boundary for Canaan. Receiving less than two inches of rain annually, the Wilderness of Zin was uninhabitable. The northernmost region the spies scouted out was at the “entrance to Hamath.” This was near the headwaters of the Orontes River, which flows northward into the Mediterranean. This valley region was known as “Rehob.” “Negev” is a Hebrew word meaning “dry” or “parched.” This desert region receives eight to twelve inches of rain annually, significantly more than the Wilderness of Zin. The Negev’s powdery soil does not absorb water well; instead, it runs off. This hinders any agricultural efforts in the region. After Abram (later called “Abraham”) separated from his nephew Lot, God promised him the land, as far as he could see. Abram then moved to “Hebron” and built an altar there to God (Gen. 13:14-18). This was the first time Scripture mentions this location. “Zoan” was the capital city of some pharaohs in Egypt’s 15th Dynasty. Being older than the fortified city of Zoan helped bolster Hebron’s reputation. David’s first capital city was Hebron; he was anointed there (2 Sam. 2:1-4,11).

How do you balance acting in faith with gathering information before acting?



Day 3: Numbers 13:23-25

Pay attention to what the spies found.

The Hebrew word “Eshcol” means “cluster.” The Hebrew word translated “valley” refers to a wadi, a streambed or ravine that is dry except during rainy seasons. The spies named the site because of the grapes they cut there. Its exact location is unclear, yet it was evidently near Hebron. To this day, the region has excellent soil for growing grapes.

Many have wondered if the description of a cluster being carried on a pole was an exaggeration. Strabo, a Greek geographer and historian who lived about 63 BC to AD 24, described grape clusters harvested in Antioch that were two cubits, or about thirty-six inches long. The impressive fruit provided proof of the region’s abundant food resources. Further, it was dramatically different from the foods the Israelites had in Egypt: “cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic” (11:5). The spies’ haul fulfilled Moses’s final instructions: “Bring back some fruit from the land” (13:20).

Verses 21 and 25 show that the spies followed the instructions God had given through Moses (see vv. 2,17a). How far had the spies traveled? From the Wilderness of Zin northward to Rehob was about 250 miles one way. This would have required the spies to walk about twelve to thirteen miles daily.

How do you think the spies reacted when they saw the abundance of the land’s resources?

Consider what God has done for you. Are you still amazed by His grace?



Day 4: Numbers 13:26-29

Highlight the word “however” in verse 28.

Initially, the spies’ report focused on the land and how agriculturally productive it was. The phrase “milk and honey” highlights the rich resources of Canaan. God used this phrase at the burning bush to describe the land (Ex. 3:17).

Having described the abundance of the land, the spies focused next on their concerns. The word “however” stands like a massive barrier in the flow of the story. The Hebrew text’s word order emphasizes the spies’ apprehension. It reads, “strong are the people who inhabit the land.” The Hebrew word translated “strong” can also mean the people were harsh and fierce.

Excavations have shown that some Canaanite cities were “fortified” and virtually impregnable, having fifteen-foot-thick walls that stood thirty to fifty feet high. The “descendants of Anak” were known for their height. The spies reported that they (the spies) were “like grasshoppers” in their sight (Num. 13:33). A generation later, Joshua ran the Anakim out. They relocated to Philistine territory, including Gath, which, centuries later, was Goliath’s hometown (Josh. 11:21-22; 1 Sam. 17:4). Another group, the “Amalekites,” had a reputation for using brutal battle tactics. The “Jebusites” were the original inhabitants of Jebus, which came to be called “Jerusalem.”

What do you imagine the mood of the people was as the spies began telling them about the bounty of the land? How do you think the mood changed after the “however”?

What “however” do you need to stop saying?



Day 5: Numbers 13:30-31

Note the contrast between Caleb's report and the negative reports.

Caleb was the first to speak up after the spies' report. He "quieted" the people. The Hebrew word here is typically an interjection and sounds much like the English word, "Hush!" The people were upset by the spies' report.

Despite the troubling report, Caleb was ready to "go up now and take possession." His words ring with confidence. He was not denying the challenge ahead. He had seen the same cities, fortifications, and people the other spies had seen. Rather than be intimidated by what he had seen, Caleb was ready to conquer the land and overcome its inhabitants.

Verse 31 highlights the contrast between faith and fear. The other spies (except Joshua) vehemently disagreed with Caleb (Num. 14:5-9). Their declaration was the opposite of his. Caleb said "we can." They said "we can't."

When the time came for a decision, the ten spies could focus on their fears, weaknesses, and inadequacies. They failed to see the challenge through God's eyes and His strength. As we will see in next week's study, fear won—at least for now.

Why was Caleb so enthused and confident that the Israelites could take possession of the land?

What challenge do you need to look at through God's eyes?

APPLY THE TEXT

What act of obedience have you been delaying because you thought it would become too difficult? What steps do you need to take to move you closer to beginning that undertaking? What will you do this week to move you forward?

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