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Lesson 12
Spying in Canaan
Numbers 13:1 - 14:4

What is the worst possible sin a Christian can commit? Is it adultery, fornication, lying, idolatry, or something even more gross? The worst sin a Christian can commit is the sin of unbelief. On the surface, it appears that adultery, fornication, and idolatry are worse than unbelief, and these gross sins certainly have seemingly far more serious human consequences. However, the reason a person commits adultery, fornication or idolatry or any other sin is because of unbelief. Unbelief is at the root of all sin, for unbelief doubts God; unbelief is rejection of His sovereignty and unbelief is declaring independence from God. When a person chooses unbelief, this person then opens up himself for all kinds of temptations to sin.

We are now going to see how Israel at Kadesh-barnea exercised unbelief to such a degree that the people opened themselves to all kinds of sin, and because of their unbelief, the whole of Israel's history was changed. Kadesh-barnea became the place of decision for Israel, and there her people made the wrong decision and were sorely disciplined by God and made to wander in the desert for thirty-eight years.

We are told Israel ***“moved out from Hazeroth and camped in the wilderness of Paran*** “(Num. 12:16). It had been at least a year (some think two years) since Israel had left Egypt. God had promised to give Israel this land.

“Say, therefore, to the sons of Israel, ‘I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from their bondage. I will also redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments. Then I will take you for My people, and I will be your God; and you shall know that I am the LORD your God, who brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. And I will bring you to the land which I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and I will give it to you for a possession; I am the LORD’” (Ex. 6:6-8).

For over a year God had taken care of every need the Jews had. If they needed water, God supernaturally provided it. If they needed food, God provided food by doing some miracle. If they needed protection from their enemies, God providentially took care of them. God took the Israelites out into the desert to train them in the art of trusting God and the art of war so they would be prepared to take the Promised Land of Canaan. God had given Israel ten tests to teach them to trust Him, and they failed every test with flying colors. The more God supernaturally dealt with the Israelites, the more they were hardened to spiritual realities. In spite of their unbelief, God brought them to Kadesh-barnea, which was on the northern edge of the Desert of Paran and just south of the Promised Land of Canaan. It was from Kadesh-barnea that Israel sent out a reconnaissance patrol to spy out the land.

SPIES ORDERED OUT - Numbers 13:1-2

“Then the LORD spoke to Moses saying, ‘Send out for yourself men so that they may spy out the land of Canaan, which I am going to give to the sons of Israel; you shall send a man from each of their fathers’ tribes, every one a leader among them.’” God gave the command to send out spies into the land, but this may have been a command by divine permission rather than by divine direction. It may not have been the direct will of God for spies to be sent into the land. From the Book of Deuteronomy, where Moses rehearsed for the Israelites what had taken place at Kadesh-barnea, we learn that it was the people who wanted spies, but God just wanted them to take the land by faith.

“Then we set out from Horeb, and went through all that great and terrible wilderness which you saw, on the way to the hill country of the Amorites, just as the LORD our God had commanded us; and we came to Kadesh-barnea. And I said to you, ‘You have come to the hill country of the Amorites which the LORD our God is about to give us. See, the LORD your God has placed the land before you; go up, take possession, as the LORD, the God of your fathers, has spoken to you. Do not fear or be dismayed.’ Then all of you approached me and said, ‘Let us send men before us, that they may search out the land for us, and bring back to us word of the way by which we should go up, and the cities which we shall enter’” (Deut. 1:19-23).

The people said, “Let us send men before us, that they may search out the land for us,” which once again shows their unbelief. They simply would not take God’s word seriously, for He had promised them without fail that they would possess it. By their own frail, human wisdom, they thought they could add something to God’s plan for conquering the land. How absurd it was for them to send spies into the land which God Himself had already spied out for them or to seek a way into the land when God had promised to show them the way by means of the cloud and pillar of fire. Moses agreed to this plan to send in spies, even though that was not the directive will of God. However, God granted permission for the spies to be sent in.

Here is a clear case of a distinction between God’s directive and permissive will. God permits some things simply because of the hardness of people’s hearts. God was longsuffering with Israel, even in her unbelief. That is why God permitted spies to be sent into the land, even though He did not desire that they do so. We cannot deny, however, that this act of unbelief happened in the sovereign will of God that is secret to God alone. In His sovereign will, God knows why things happen. Unbelief can and does keep us from God’s best in our lives, even though we know that in God’s sovereign will all things work together for good (Rom. 8:28).

The land was theirs by God’s promise, and all they had to do was believe the promise of God to receive it. Whether they entered the land and enjoyed its blessings depended on whether they would believe God’s word or not. Israel was to walk by faith but in unbelief sent in spies. What does faith want with spies or proofs? Faith believes God apart from evidence, proof and tangibles, for to walk by faith is not to walk by sight. “. . . ***For we walk by faith, not by sight***” (2 Cor. 5:7). Weak faith must always be bolstered by human investigation and visible proof.

SPIES APPOINTED — Numbers 13:3-16

“So Moses sent them from the wilderness of Paran at the command of the LORD, all of them men who were heads of the Sons of Israel. These then were their names: from the tribe of Reuben, Shammua the son of Zaccur; from the tribe of Simeon, Shaphat the son of Hori; from the tribe of Judah, Caleb the son of Jephunneh; from the tribe of Issachar, Igal the son of Joseph; from the tribe of Ephraim, Hoshea the son of Nun, from the tribe of Benjamin, Palti the son of Raphu; from the tribe of Zebulun, Gaddiel the son of Sodi; from the tribe of Joseph, from the tribe of Manasseh, Gaddi the son of Susi; from the tribe of Dan, Ammiel the son of Gemalli; from the tribe of Asher, Sethur the son of Michael; from the tribe of Naphtali, Nahbi the son of Vophsi; from the tribe of Gad, Geuel the son of Machi. These are the names of the men whom Moses sent to spy out the land; but Moses called Hoshea the son of Nun, Joshua.” One spy from every tribe was picked and each spy was a leader in his particular tribe. Technically, these were twelve men who were all professed believers in Jehovah, who all were leaders, who all knew essentially the same doctrine, who all had the same promises from God and who all had the same opportunity to demonstrate faith, spiritual power, and emotional stability. Yet only two out of the twelve would believe God and bring glory to God. The other ten would fail miserably and disgrace God.

God sent these spies on this reconnaissance to see whether they would have enough faith to cross the border into Canaan and conquer the land. Only two passed the test. This is a poor percentage. Yet, are

there any more than two believers out of twelve in our day who really believe God? It would be wonderful if one-sixth of all Christians today had enough faith to go through any situation in life by faith in Christ and glorify God through it.

SPIES INSTRUCTED - Numbers 13:17-20

“When Moses sent them to spy out the land of Canaan, he said to them, ‘Go up there into the Negev; then go up into the hill country. And see what the land is like, and whether the people who live in it are strong or weak, whether they are few or many. And how is the land in which they live, is it good or bad? And how are the cities in which they live, are they like open camps or with fortifications? And how is the land, is it fat or lean? Are there trees in it or not? Make an effort then to get some fruit of the land.’ Now the time was the time of the first ripe grapes.” The spies were instructed to go south and north and back again in the land and report back about the inhabitants, the terrain, the cities, the agriculture, and the fortifications.

SPIES INVESTIGATE — Numbers 13:21-24

“So they went up and spied out the land from the wilderness of Zin as far as Rehob, at Lebo-hamath. When they had gone up into the Negev, they came to Hebron where Ahiman, Sheshai and Talmai, the descendents of Anak were. (Now Hebron was built seven years before Zoan in Egypt.)” The descendants of Anak were a very tall and husky race of people. Perhaps some were eight and nine feet tall. This is why they are called a people of “great size or “giants” (Num. 13:32). The spies divided themselves into several groups to survey the land and each group saw Ahiman, Sheshai and Talmai, the giant—like men. Some scholars have thought that Ahiman, Sheshai and Talmai were names of tribes and not individuals. However, it is quite possible that these three individuals may have been still alive when the city of Hebron was assigned to Caleb about fifty years later, and when he drove out these three sons of Anak (Joshua 15:14).

It is interesting to note that special attention is given to the city of Hebron because near there was the field of Machpelah where the patriarchs, Abraham and Sarah, were buried (Gen. 23:2). The dead bodies of these patriarchs kept possession of the land for Israel and that present generation of Jews, but the giants presently held the land.

“Then they came to the valley of Eshcol and from there cut down a branch with a single cluster of grapes; and they carried it on a pole between two men, with some of the pomegranates and the figs. That place was called the valley of Eshcol, because of the cluster which the sons of Israel cut down from there.” North of the city of Hebron was the valley of Eshcol, one of the finest grape-producing areas in all of the land of Canaan. They took a huge cluster of grapes, put it on a pole, and carried it between two men to bring back to show the children of Israel how fruitful this Promised Land was.

SPIES GIVE A UNIFIED REPORT — Numbers 13:25-29

“When they returned from spying out the land, at the end of forty days, they proceeded to come to Moses and Aaron and to all the congregation of the sons of Israel in the wilderness of Paran, at Kadesh; and they brought back word to them and to all the congregation and showed them the fruit of the land.” For forty days they combed the land, examining the cities, population, production, terrain, forest areas, and the fortifications.

“Thus they told him, and said, ‘We went into the land where you sent us; and it certainly does flow with milk and honey, and this is its fruit.’” Three times in the Book of Exodus, God promised to bring Israel into the land flowing with milk and honey (Ex. 3:8, 17; 33:3). It was not literally flowing with milk and honey, but it was extremely fertile land and would bring great prosperity to Israel as a nation. The unified report of the twelve was that this was a great and glorious land just as God had promised.

It is interesting that the spies verified what God had said and what they had previously been unable to believe. They did not need to spy out the land. They only needed to believe God and move out by faith. This report should have given them courage to take the land, for it was theirs as God had promised if they would but exercise faith.

“Nevertheless, the people who live in the land are strong, and the cities are fortified and very large; and moreover, we saw the descendants of Anak there. Amalek is living in the land of the Negev and the Hittites and the Jebusites and the Amorites are living in the hill country, and the Canaanites are living by the sea and by the side of Jordan.” The unified report of the twelve also included some hard realities. The word “nevertheless” could be translated “but.” It was a marvelous land, but there were some hard, cold facts that had to be faced. The population was large, there were fierce and strong fighters; the cities were well fortified, and also some of the people were giant-like. With this little “but” we begin to see the faith of most of these spies crumbling. They began to look at the circumstances and not the God of the circumstances. The spies had seen the obstacles and concluded that the land could not be taken. They were interpreting everything from their own experience rather than interpreting everything on the basis of who God is.

Their unbelief was remarkable. Just a few months before Israel had seen God defeat Egypt, the most powerful nation on earth, at the Red Sea (and Israel did not have an army), and now they could not understand how God could defeat the lesser nation of the Canaanites when they had a strong army and the promises of Almighty God behind them. How quick God’s people are to forget His supernatural dealings with them.

SPIES GIVE A MINORITY REPORT - Numbers 13:30

“Then Caleb quieted the people before Moses. . .” When Israel heard the report about the land, the people were terrified and there was mass hysteria. They simply crumbled under the pressure, which they had done under every test previous to this time. Caleb had to quiet the people because it was difficult to speak when there was weeping, wailing, and moaning.

“...And said, ‘We should by all means go up and take possession of it, for we shall surely overcome it.’” Caleb spoke up and said, “We can possess the land. Not just conquer it, but possess it, for God is with us.” Why did Caleb speak rather than Joshua, for these were the only two spies who truly believed God? Joshua was Moses’ right-hand man, and he would have been thought of as a “yes-man” for Moses. Therefore, Caleb, of the leading tribe of Judah, spoke up to protect Moses and Joshua from the angry congregation.

Caleb spoke so confidently of success. Why? He believed God and His promises. Caleb and Joshua saw the strong inhabitants, the fortified cities and the giants of the land, but they concluded the Canaanite nation could be taken. They thought positively about the hard, cold facts because they saw God and not the circumstances. They took a divine viewpoint toward life, Good military logic alone should have shown that it was possible to defeat the Canaanites. Israel had a strong army of at least 600,000 men. They had Moses who was their wise and brave commander-in-chief, and God was on Moses’ side. They also had Joshua, the most brilliant military mind of that day. While the Canaanites were strong, they were also dispersed and could not unite readily. The tribes of Canaan had different interests and were constantly fighting one another. Canaan, being a plentiful land, could sustain the Israeli army. Even if the cities were well fortified, Israel could lay siege. And even giant-like men do not make good warriors, for they are not dexterous and are easy targets to hit. The Canaanites could be defeated, and Caleb and Joshua knew it, but where did they get their courage? They got it from God who on His solemn oath promised the land of Canaan to Israel.

Caleb and Joshua gave a positive report because they believed God. Everything Caleb and Joshua

said was to encourage faith in the people of God. They were not negative people. Beware of Christians who are always negative and discouraging people from faith in the living God. Make positive Christians your friends, for they will encourage you on in the things of Christ.

There is a great spiritual lesson for us from the life of Caleb and Joshua. What we actually see depends upon how we look at things. If we look with the eyes of faith, nothing is impossible for us, but without faith, nothing is truly possible.

Joshua and Caleb gave the minority report, "We can take the land and possess it!" These were the only two men in that generation of Jews who entered into the land. That whole generation of unbelieving Jews would wander in the desert for thirty-eight years, and their carcasses would fall in the wilderness. Only Joshua and Caleb would go into the land and all the children twenty and under at the time of this rebellion. Notice, however, that Caleb and Joshua suffered for thirty-eight years because of the unbelief of Israel. Unbelief can at times hold back blessing for those who truly believe. Unbelief does not just affect us; it affects others. Unbelief is a devastating sin!

SPIES GIVE A MAJORITY REPORT - Numbers 13:31-32

"But the men who had gone up with him said, 'We are not able to go up against the people, for they are too strong for us.'" The majority of the spies gave a negative report. What is this but a human viewpoint? It cannot be done! There are too many obstacles! Our army is too small! Our leader Moses is too old! Joshua and Caleb are a couple of fanatical upstarts who merely parrot Moses' thoughts! Besides, there are giants in the land! Negative, negative, negative, or to put it more biblically, unbelief, unbelief, unbelief!

Here is a clear case in Scripture where the majority was not right. The majority was in unbelief and if a democratic election had been held that day among the spies, unbelief would have won out because these negative spies refused to believe God.

"So they gave out to the sons of Israel a bad report of the land which they had spied out, saying, 'The land through which we have gone, in spying it out, is a land that devours its inhabitants; and all the people whom we saw in it are men of great size. There also we saw the Nephilim (the sons of Anak are part of the Nephilim); and we became like grasshoppers in our own sight, and so we were in their sight.'" Unbelief caused these ten spies to get their eyes on the circumstances rather than on the Almighty God who has control over all circumstances. Their unbelief shut God right out of the picture. Everything looked big (big armies, big cities, big men) because they had such a small concept of God. They did not see God as sovereign over all events, but that is always what happens when unbelief takes over.

These ten spies gave a bad report. The spies, however, did not think it was a bad report; they considered it to be a wise, carefully thought-out report, for they had considered every human angle. It was a bad report, not because they did not have the facts straight, but because they looked at the facts with unbelief, for God had promised to give them the land.

Because these ten spies operated on a human viewpoint of unbelief, they had fear in their lives. Everything they said instilled fear into people's lives. They never once instilled any positive note of faith into anyone. Negative people in unbelief are destructive to God's work, for they always cause God's people to panic in fear.

Because Israel accepted this negative report of the ten spies, the people further hardened their hearts to God and continued to operate in unbelief. The result of all this was that they wandered in the desert for thirty-eight years, never entering the promised land. This tells us that it is much easier to believe a negative report than a positive one because it is much easier to arouse people's fears than to build their confidence. Unbelief has such devastating effects upon the life of a Christian!

SCHISM BY ISRAEL - Numbers 14:1-4

“Then all the congregation lifted up their voice and cried, and the people wept all night.” When the children of Israel accepted the negative, evil report of the unbelieving spies, they fell apart emotionally as they were gripped by fear. They succumbed to a form of sinful hysteria. In this emotional state, they could not think straight, and they became totally disoriented spiritually. A type of mob psychology took over. Fear is always the opposite of faith.

This incident shows how the negative opinion of a few (actually ten spies) can have a significant negative impact on a multitude (about two million). A negative approach to life can always stir a crowd quicker than a positive approach.

Why did these Jews fall apart? They had never learned to trust God even though they had been tested ten times since they left Egypt. For over a year, God gave them plenty of chances to trust Him. Miracle after miracle was done for these rebels, and they would not believe, and in every case they grumbled against God. Now they were brought to the big decision to go into the land, and they failed again. The reason they failed this test goes back for over a year when they first failed to trust God at the Red Sea. They had been given many opportunities to practice trusting God, but when they came down to the big decision to enter the land they could not make it. A habit pattern of unbelief for over a year resulted in total unbelief to take the land.

“And all the sons of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron . . .” Their unbelief vented itself against Moses and Aaron, their leaders. Grumbling, no matter how we slice it, is the result of unbelief, because we are saying God is not dealing with us fairly. Unbelief makes negative people who only know how to criticize. Unbelief has such devastating effects upon the Christian!

“...And 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!’” Their unbelief had resulted in great self-pity; for they were so depressed they wanted to die. They had lost all sense of reason. They wished to die for fear of dying. They thought they would die in attempting to conquer the land of Canaan, so they would rather die like coyotes in the desert. Unbelief is so devastating to mental soundness and emotional stability!

“And why is the LORD bringing us into this land, to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become plunder; would it not be better for us to return to Egypt?” -- Now the unbelief of the Jews caused them to blame God for this whole situation. Their unbelief caused them to be irrational. They were concerned for their children, but they should have been concerned for the abominable spiritual condition of their own souls. God had made provision for their children, for all the children twenty years and under would enter the land and all adults over twenty would die in the desert. The issue was not their children, but their own miserable spiritual condition brought on by total unbelief. Their unbelief also caused them to want to go back to Egypt rather than go forward to Canaan. God’s blessing was forward, not backward, and their unbelief kept a whole generation out of the land forever and the total nation out for thirty-eight years. Oh, the devastating effects of unbelief!

“So they said to one another, ‘Let us appoint a leader and return to Egypt.’” Their unbelief had brought such degeneration spiritually to the nation of Israel that they were ready to throw out Moses, their leader and God’s appointed man for them. They wanted another leader because they knew full well that Moses would not be their leader in retreat. Notice that unbelief made them indecisive about entering the land, but when the decision was made not to go forward, they became very decisive, organized, and opinionated about removing Moses and returning to Egypt. They were able to organize for evil in unbelief but could not organize in belief to take the land. Such are the devastating effects of unbelief!

Notice the steps for this whole process: unbelief, hysteria, grumbling, self-pity, irrationality, and

finally, total rebellion. Where did it all start? With unbelief! Beware of the devastating effects of unbelief. Unbelief could destroy you.

CONCLUSION

If you are a Christian facing giant problems in your life, you can overcome these obstacles by faith in the living God. The walls of circumstances may be high, but God is even higher in heaven. The giants may be strong, but God is stronger - He is almighty.

We Christians have the Promised Land before us. Yes, there are giants. Yes, there are obstacles. But the blessing of God is forward and we must not move backward. We must go forward and never retreat. God has given us promises and we must claim these promises by faith and conquer the spiritual enemies before us. Whatever our promised land is, we can possess it if we believe God, if we trust God, if we keep a divine viewpoint towards what God is doing.

If you are not a Christian, you should know that sometimes the land of Canaan is symbolically represented as heaven itself. What will keep you out of heaven? The same thing that kept Israel out of the land of Canaan: unbelief. The way to heaven is to believe that Jesus Christ died for your sins, bowing before Him as your Lord. Yes, only Christ can take you to heaven, the promised heavenly land. You cannot and will not enter into God's heavenly place of rest unless you believe in Christ. Therefore, ***"Today, if you hear His (Christ's) voice, do not harden your hearts . . ."*** (Heb. 3:15) for you are not able to enter because of unbelief. Right now, believe in Christ and be guaranteed entrance into God's eternal rest.