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**Lesson 13**  
**The Consequences of Unbelief**  
Numbers 14:1-45

Unbelief is a very subtle sin, and when persisted in, it can have devastating consequences. Unbelief doubts God's word; it is questioning His character, and it is calling His power into question. The problem of doubting God goes away back to the Garden of Eden when Satan said to Eve, ***"Has God said?"*** The devil was able to get Adam and Eve to question God's faithfulness and the consequences of our first parents' sin were devastating. One act of unbelief caused Adam and Eve to become sinners and plunged the whole human race into sin.

As one reads the Bible, one realizes certain facts about the sin of unbelief. First, God hates the sin of unbelief. Second, God will not tolerate the sin of unbelief. Third, God judges sinners for their sin of unbelief. Fourth, God disciplines saints for their sins of unbelief.

The seriousness of the sin of unbelief and its devastating consequences can easily be seen in the lives of the children of Israel. God had miraculously delivered Israel from Egypt through the crossing of the Red Sea, so that mighty Pharaoh and his armies were destroyed. Then God took the infant nation of Israel into the desert to train her in the art of war and the art of believing God so the people could conquer the country of Canaan, the Promised Land. While in the desert, God supernaturally provided water and food for the sons of Israel. Each crisis they faced was a test to teach them faith, but each test was met with colossal failure. At each test, the people griped, moaned, groaned, complained and murmured, criticizing Moses and even God. After they had been in the desert for two years, it was time for them to enter the land of Canaan. God brought them right to the border of the land of Canaan. Twelve spies were sent into the land and they came back with a report. Ten of the spies gave a majority report saying, "We can't take the land. The fortifications of the Canaanite cities are too great. The enemy is great in number, and besides, there are giants in the land." The giants were tall men, about seven to nine feet tall. Because they would not believe God, fear gripped their hearts. Two of the spies, Joshua and Caleb, gave a minority report and said, ***"We should by all means go up and take possession of the land, for we shall surely overcome it"*** (Num. 13:30).

Here were twelve spies. They were all leaders; they were all recipients of covenant blessings; they all had essentially the same doctrine and promises, and all were professing believers in Jehovah-God. Technically all had the same opportunity to demonstrate faith and glorify God, but only two did so. What was the difference? Two decided to believe God and ten decided not to believe God. The ten spies were able to influence the whole congregation of Israel by their negative report so that Israel, with fear, refused to enter the land.

PARTICIPATION IN SIN — Numbers 14:1-10

***"Then all the congregation lifted up their voices and cried, and the people wept that night. And all the sons of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron; 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! 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?'"*** Once again Israel began to complain in unbelief and the people wanted to die in the desert or return to Egypt. Anything for them was better than going forward in belief. They were hypocritically concerned about their children when they should have been concerned about their own walk with the Lord.

God will take care of our children if we will but concentrate upon our own walk with the Lord and live a life of faith as a supernaturalist.

***“So they said to one another, ‘Let us appoint a leader and return to Egypt.’”*** The fear of unbelief had so captivated the thinking of the Israelites that they wanted to have a coup to overthrow Moses and appoint a new commander-in-chief to lead them in retreat back to Egypt, the land of slavery and misery. Unbelief distorts people’s thinking and causes them to do some very strange things.

***“Then Moses and Aaron fell on their faces in the presence of all the assembly of the congregation of the sons of Israel.”*** Moses and Aaron immediately saw that the children of Israel were guilty not only of unbelief and rebellion, but also blasphemy. Immediately they fell on their faces in prayer for the nation, realizing they were on the verge of apostasy and perhaps had passed the point of no return in their unbelief.

It is possible for a professing Christian to apostatize and fall away from the living God. ***“Take care, brethren, lest there should be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart, in falling away (apostatizing) from the living God”*** (Heb. 3:12).

***“And Joshua the son of Nun and Caleb the son of Jephunneh of those who spied out the land, tore their clothes; and they spoke to all the congregation of the sons of Israel, saying ‘The land which we passed through to spy out is an exceedingly good land. If the LORD is pleased with us, then He will bring us into this land, and give it to us- a land which flows with milk and honey. Only do not rebel against the LORD and do not fear the people of the land, for they shall be our prey (food). Their protection has been removed from them, and the LORD is with us; do not fear them.’”*** Moses and Aaron, the old, wise warriors, fell on their faces to pray, for they knew it was impossible to reason with this stiff-necked people. Joshua and Caleb, the younger, more zealous and somewhat idealistic leaders, tried to reason with this rebellious nation. This was their final appeal, hoping that they would reverse their decision not to enter the land. Their faith was so tremendous, for they said, ***“For they shall be our prey (food).”*** Today we would say, “This is a piece of cake.” Why? God is with us! They reasoned correctly because they believed God with a divine viewpoint towards life. They knew in their experience what the New Testament tells us: ***“If God is for us, who is against us”*** (Rom. 8:31)?

***“But all the congregation said to stone them with stones. Then the glory of the LORD appeared in the tent of meeting to all the sons of Israel.”*** All the reasoning of Joshua and Caleb was useless. Israel was deaf to any supernatural kind of thinking. In fact, the more the two reasoned from a divine viewpoint, the more exasperated and outraged the mob became. They picked up stones to kill Joshua and Caleb and probably Moses and Aaron as well. That angry crowd probably cried out, “Put Joshua and Caleb to death, for they are just “yes” men and puppets of Moses!” It never occurred to them that what Joshua and Caleb had in common with Moses was faith in the living God. This tells us very clearly that those who need to be reformed in lifestyle the most are those who hate those who would reform them because they tell the truth. Just when it looked like Joshua, Caleb, Moses and Aaron were about to become martyrs for the Faith, God supernaturally intervened by appearing at the tabernacle court. This also shows us that those who faithfully expose themselves for God are sure to receive the special protection of God.

PROVOKING GOD’S WRATH – Numbers 14:11-19

***“And the LORD said to Moses, ‘How long will this people spurn Me? And how long will they not believe Me, despite all the signs which I have performed in their midst?’”*** God, out of disgust with Israel’s repeated unbelief, began to dialogue with Moses. God had done miracle after miracle for this rebellious people and still they would not commit themselves to the living God. God had reached the limits of His patience.

***“I will smite them with pestilence and dispossess (disinherit) them, and I will make you into a nation greater and mightier than they.”*** God was so angry with Israel that He threatened to disinherit them. Their inheritance, according to the Abrahamic Covenant, was the Promised Land of Canaan. But

God was considering breaking the covenant with Israel and starting again with Moses and a new nation. God would be faithful to His covenant but not with that generation of Jews, because they were open transgressors of the covenant. As unbelievers, they had already cut themselves off from their rightful inheritance in the covenant. God left them because they first left God. God had every right to cast them out of the covenant and destroy them immediately.

Were all these Jews true believers in Jehovah-God? I think not. Many were mere professors in apostasy who never really believed God. Others were probably rebellious believers who refused to go on. Whether they were apostates or rebellious believers, the end result was physical death for their rebellion. Only God would know who the true believers were and who would go to heaven or hell. Whatever, God would deal with all for their unbelief. He would judge the mere professors with eternal judgment and the believers with divine discipline.

***“But Moses said to the LORD, ‘Then the Egyptians will hear of it, for by Thy strength Thou didst bring up this people from their midst, and they will tell it to the inhabitants of this land. They have heard that Thou, O LORD, art in the midst of this people, for Thou, O LORD, art seen eye to eye, while Thy cloud stands over them; and Thou dost go before them in a pillar of cloud by day and in a pillar of fire by night. Now if Thou dost slay this people as one man, then the nations who have heard of Thy fame will say, “Because the LORD could not bring this people into the land which He promised them by oath, therefore He slaughtered them in the wilderness.”’*** Moses, a humble man, was not interested in becoming a new nation to inherit the promises of the Abrahamic Covenant. When he saw Israel in danger of God’s judgment, he began immediately to pray for the Israelites as a mediator. Moses did not excuse the sin of Israel, or object to God’s divine judgment, or argue that God’s sentence was inconsistent with His love because he knew Israel was guilty and deserved whatever God gave. Moses, however, appealed to God’s reputation, saying that the Egyptians and the Canaanites would conclude that God could not finish what He started; that is, He was a powerless God to handle Israel. Also, they would conclude that God was untrue to His word, for He had promised them by sovereign oath in the Abrahamic Covenant that they would enter the land.

All Christians must learn to pray more for the glory of God and appeal to the faithfulness of His own reputation rather than “give me, give me, give me” prayers. Christians should be more interested in God’s name, God’s reputation, and God’s glory than having all their particular wants met. When we begin to pray for God’s glory, it will change our prayer lives.

***“But now, I pray, let the power of the Lord be great, just as Thou has declared, ‘The LORD is slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, forgiving iniquity and transgression; but He will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generations.’ Pardon, I pray, the iniquity of this people according to the greatness of Thy lovingkindness, just as Thou also hast forgiven this people, from Egypt even until now.”*** Moses appealed to God’s love and mercy to forgive Israel as a nation, that the covenant promise might be fulfilled. He asked that God might deal graciously with them just one more time. As a righteous and just God, Moses knew He would have to deal with these rebels, but God could also forgive the nation somehow and preserve His covenant with them.

PUNISHMENT STATED - Numbers 14:20-25

***“So the LORD said, ‘I have pardoned them according to your word; but indeed, as I live, all the earth will be filled with the glory of the LORD.’”*** God would pardon the nation for the sin of unbelief so the covenant would remain intact, but He would be glorified by specifically judging the adults of that generation for their unbelief. God never winks at sin. He must judge sin whether that sin is in believers or unbelievers.

***“Surely all the men who have seen My glory and My signs, which I performed in Egypt and in***

***the wilderness, yet have put Me to the test these ten times and have not listened to My voice, shall by no means see the land which I swore to their fathers, nor shall any of those who spurned Me see it.***” God made it clear that every person who was involved directly in this rebellion of unbelief would not enter the land of Canaan. Ten times God did fantastic miracles in their presence and tested them for one ounce of genuine faith and ten times they failed and came up short. God swore in His wrath that they would never enter into the Promised Land because now their unbelief had grown to the point where they were guilty of apostasy. They were turning from the living God when they had seen and known so much about Him. They had come to the breaking point of unbelief, after knowing so much about God, and they turned back. Their hearts were rotten and with their lives they proved themselves unsaved. This final act of rebellion and unbelief was tantamount to apostasy. They had come to the place where it was impossible to renew them to repentance.

***“For in the case of those who have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God, and put Him to open shame.”*** (Heb. 6:4-6)

These rebellious Jews had trampled on God’s commandments, despised His promises, and disregarded His threatenings. They had passed the point of no return and God gave them up. He disinherited them from the covenant because they would not believe.

***“But my servant Caleb, because he has had a different spirit and has followed Me fully, I will bring into the land which he entered, and his descendants shall take possession of it.”*** Caleb and Joshua, who were true believers, and their children would enter the land. Why? They believed God. Caleb had the spirit of belief and he followed the Lord fully. Caleb and Joshua wanted to go forward, persevering to the end. Yet, the unbelieving Israelites wanted to go backwards because they had no real faith.

***“Now the Amalekites and the Canaanites live in the valleys; turn tomorrow and set out to the wilderness by the way of the Red Sea.”*** This was one of the saddest days in Israel’s history. God, disgusted with the sons of Israel, commanded them to turn back from Canaan and to go out into the wilderness. If they had only believed God, they would have gone into the land. If they had only the faith of a grain of mustard seed, the land would have been theirs. Instead, they chose not to believe and were forced into the desert.

PUNISHMENT INTENSIFIED - Numbers 14:26-38

***“And the LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying, ‘How long shall I bear with this evil congregation who are grumbling against Me? I have heard the complaints of the sons of Israel, which they are making against Me. Say to them, “As I live,” says the LORD, “just as you have spoken in My hearing, so I will surely do to you; your corpses shall fall in this wilderness, even all your numbered men, according to your complete number from twenty years old and upward, who have grumbled against Me. Surely you shall not come into the land in which I swore to settle you, except Caleb the son of Jephunneh and Joshua the Son of Nun. Your children, however, whom you said would become a prey—I will bring them in, and they shall know the land which you have rejected. But as for you, your corpses shall fall in this wilderness.”’*** Now God made it known that every male and female above age twenty would die in the wilderness. God’s people would enter the land, but that particular group of adults would not enter. Those twenty and under, plus Caleb and Joshua, would enter the land. The next generation would come to the land of promise. Those who were over twenty would live out their lives, but they would not see Canaan because they had been disinherited because of unbelief. Their children, whom they

feared would be taken away from them by the Canaanites, would enter the land. By judging the guilty adults, God's justice was satisfied, and by showing mercy to the children, God's faithfulness to His own covenant could be satisfied.

***“And your sons shall be shepherds (wander) for forty years in the wilderness, and they shall suffer for your unfaithfulness (fornication), until your corpses lie in the wilderness. According to the number of days which you spied out the land, forty days, for every day you shall bear your guilt a year, even forty years, and you shall know my opposition. I the LORD have spoken, surely this I will do to all this evil congregation who are gathered together against Me. In this wilderness they shall be destroyed, and there they shall die.”*** God said that the whole nation would wander in the wilderness for forty years because of that one generation's rank unbelief. God's decision was absolute and irreversible. Their children would also suffer in the desert because of their rebellion against God. The word “unfaithfulness” literally means ‘fornication’ or ‘whoredom’ indicating they were spiritually unfaithful and apostates. This verse shows us as Christians that our belief or unbelief can certainly affect others, especially our children. God would oppose the Jews for forty long years in that they would not see the covenant promises fulfilled. However, God continued to meet their physical needs for the whole forty years.

***“For the LORD your God has blessed you in all that you have done; He has known your wanderings through this great wilderness. These forty years the LORD your God has been with you; you have not lacked a thing”*** (Deut. 2:7).

Forty long, hard, and miserable years of wandering from place to place because of unbelief and disobedience. Think of it! Forty years is over half a lifetime. Forty years seems like an eternity. What happened during that time? We are not told, but we can make a few guesses. The older generation lived lives of fruitless misery. They worked, ate and played, but there was no spiritual reality to their lives. They were spiritually useless as they wandered aimlessly. They were put on the shelf because they were doomed to abide by their fateful decision to not enter the land. Surely the older generation became frustrated with the younger generation that seemed to be growing in numbers and showed definite signs of spiritual life. The older generation watched their friends die off one by one while the younger generation enjoyed excellent health and were growing spiritually. The older generation must have had conflict over entrusting the new generation with authority and power since that older generation was so distrustful of all kinds of authority and leadership. How horrible to know the will of God and yet be out of the direct will of God for forty years! They knew of the promises, but now they understood that hypocrites and apostates have no part in the promises. They knew God's alienation or opposition for forty long years. What a tragedy that God had to wait for a whole generation of unbelievers to die before His work could go forward. If the land was to be conquered, it had to be by a new generation, which would believe God and go forward. As one person said, “Most local churches are just two or three deaths away from revival.”

***“As for the men whom Moses sent to spy out the land and who returned and made all the congregation grumble against him by bringing out a bad report concerning the land, even those men who brought out the very bad report of the land died by a plague before the LORD. But Joshua the son of Nun and Caleb the son of Jephunneh remained alive out of those men who went to spy out the land.”*** God brought an immediate judgment on the ringleaders of unbelief. The ten unbelieving spies were struck by a plague and died suddenly. However, Joshua and Caleb continued to live. This whole scene must have made a tremendous impact upon the whole nation of Israel.

PRESUMPTION OF THE FAITHLESS — Numbers 14:39-45

***“And when Moses spoke these words to all the sons of Israel, the people mourned greatly. In the morning, however, they rose up early and went up to the ridge of the hill country, saying, ‘Here we are; we have indeed sinned, but we will go up to the place which the LORD has promised.’”*** The destruction of the ten spies and the preservation of Joshua and Caleb had a profound effect upon Israel,

but it was too late. They sensed God's impending judgment on them. They confessed their sin of unbelief; they mourned in repentance. They were now ready to move into the land, but it was too late.

***“But Moses said, ‘Why then are you transgressing the commandment of the LORD, when it will not succeed? Do not go up, lest you be struck down before your enemies, for the LORD is not among you. For the Amalekites and the Canaanites will be there in front of you, and you will fall by the sword, inasmuch as you have turned back from following the LORD. And the LORD will not be with you.’”*** Moses told the Israelites that God would not be with them. They had angered God by their unbelief, rebellion, and apostasy, and God had decreed that they would never enter into His land of rest.

***“Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as in the day of Massah in the wilderness; when your fathers tested Me, they tried Me, though they had seen My work. For forty years I loathed that generation, and said, they are a people who err in their heart. Therefore I swore in My anger, truly they shall not enter into my rest”*** (Psalm 95:8-11).

They had passed the point of no return and no matter how much they confessed and repented, God would not grant their request for they had turned back from God and His covenant through unbelief. God had sworn an irreversible oath against them. They were like Esau who with tears sought to have God change His mind about him but He would not because his unbelief had driven him to apostasy.

***“See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled; that there be no immoral or godless person like Esau, who sold his own birthright for a single meal. For you know that even afterwards, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought for it with tears”*** (Heb. 12:15-17).

Why did this all happen? Israel failed to go forward because of unbelief. Instead, the people turned back in retreat.

***“Therefore, do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised. FOR YET IN A VERY LITTLE WHILE, HE WHO IS COMING WILL COME, AND WILL NOT DELAY. BUT MY RIGHTEOUS ONE SHALL LIVE BY FAITH; AND IF HE SHRINKS BACK, MY SOUL HAS NO PLEASURE IN HIM. But we are not of those who shrink back to destruction, but of those who have faith to the preserving of the soul”*** (Heb. 10:35-39).

These Jews would not seek the Lord while He might be found, and now He would not be found. God decreed; God made up His mind; God determined in His wrath that that particular generation of Jews would be disinherited and cut off from the covenant promises. Why? Unbelief, unbelief and more unbelief!

***“But they went up heedlessly to the ridge of the hill country; neither the ark of the covenant of the LORD nor Moses left the camp. Then the Amalekites and the Canaanites who lived in that hill country came down, and struck them and beat them down as far as Hormah.”*** These rebels disobeyed God again, for He had told them to go back out into the desert. To go forward now would be pure defeat. Moses warned them, but in pure presumption, they insisted on going forward anyway in the arm of the flesh. Yet, God was not with them. They went forward in their own strength and were miserably defeated in battle. The land that could have been theirs the day before was now closed to them. Why? The land could only be conquered by faith and only faith pleases God. ***“And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him”*** (Heb. 11:6). The Canaanite armies drove Israel to Hormah, which means “the ban-place.” Israel

was defeated and banned to a life of wandering on the desert for forty years. Why? Unbelief! Disobedience!

## CONCLUSION

It is unbelief that keeps a person from experiencing the heavenly, spiritual rest of salvation, and the author of the Book of Hebrews illustrates the believers spiritual rest of salvation by comparing it with Israel who failed to enter the promised land by faith.

*“And with whom was He angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? And to whom did He swear that they should not enter His rest, but to those who were disobedient? And so we see that they were not able to enter because of unbelief. Therefore, let us fear lest, while a promise remains of entering His rest, any one of you should seem to have come short of it. For indeed we have had good news preached to us, just as they also; but the word they heard did not profit them, because it was not united by faith in those who heard. For we who have believed enter that rest, just as He has said, ‘AS I SWORE IN MY WRATH, THEY SHALL NOT ENTER MY REST,’ although His works were finished from the foundation of the world. For if Joshua had given them rest, He would not have spoken of another day after that. There remains therefore a Sabbath rest for the people of God. For the one who has entered His rest has himself also rested from his works, as God did from His. Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest, lest anyone fall through following the same example of disobedience” (Heb. 3:17—4:11).*

Do you want spiritual rest for your sin-weary soul? Trust Christ. Do you want to enter into God’s heavenly rest? Trust Christ. Only unbelief about Christ will keep you from salvation. Therefore, I urge you, **“Today if you hear His (Christ’s) voice, do not harden your hearts.”** Believe in Christ and you shall escape eternal judgment and you shall possess the spiritual Promised Land, the New Jerusalem, even heaven itself.