

Numbers 13 - 14

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Date: 07 May 2006

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[0 : 00] Please turn in your Bibles to Numbers chapters 13 and 14, Faith and Unbelief. What do you think is the greatest threat to the Christian Church in 2006?

Is it the hostility of an increasingly secular society or the growing influence of non-Christian religions?

What about New Age practices and ideas and a resurgent Islam? These things are indeed a threat. But I would suggest that the greatest threat facing the Church today, and indeed the greatest threat that has faced the people of God in every generation, is unbelief.

I think the Church is more vulnerable to attack from within than she is to attack from without. And if that is true of the Church corporately, it is also true of the individual Christian.

We see that very clearly in this passage before us. When the Book of Numbers opens, the Israelites have just escaped from slavery in Egypt.

[1 : 34] The people are counted as they get ready to enter the land God has promised to give them. Excitement is in the air.

Things are really beginning to happen. In chapter 10, Moses invites his Midianite brother-in-law, Hobab, to join the Israelites, to throw his lot in with them.

He says to Hobab, we are setting out for the place about which the Lord said, I will give it to you. Come with us and we will treat you well, for the Lord has promised good concerning Israel.

If you come with us, we will share with you whatever good things the Lord gives us. Moses is confident that the Lord is going to shower good things on his people.

After all, when he was commissioned at the burning bush, didn't the Lord promise that he would rescue his people from Egypt and bring them into a good and spacious land?

[2 : 41] A land flowing with milk and honey. There is excitement in the air. But that excitement soon fades.

In chapter 11, things begin to go horribly wrong. The people start complaining about their hardships. Then they complain about the diet of manna the Lord has given them.

If only we had meat to eat, they cry. And so the Lord provides them with quail until it comes out of their nostrils and they loathe it.

And then Moses' brother Aaron and his sister Miriam begin to murmur against Moses' leadership. Rebellion is becoming something of a habit for the Israelites.

But by the time we reach chapter 13, which we read, things appear to be back on track. This is what is instructed by the Lord to send men to spy out Canaan.

[3 : 50] Verse 1. The Lord said to Moses, Send some men to explore the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the Israelites. Note that the Lord describes Canaan as the land which he is giving to the Israelites.

The Lord is about to fulfill his promise. The promise that he has given his people on numerous occasions. And so the men set out.

They go through the Negev and reach Hebron. Hebron was where Abraham had first been given the promise of the land. And now, hundreds of years later, there are descendants of Abraham in Hebron.

And the promise is about to be fulfilled. The spies spend 40 days in the land and they return with some of the fruits.

They bring grapes from the valley of Eshcol, along with pomegranates and figs. But when they give the report, it turns out that the spies are divided.

[4 : 59] There is a minority report alongside the majority report. So let's look first at this majority report in verses 26 to 29 and verses 31 to 33 under the heading Unbelief Demonstrated.

Unbelief Demonstrated. The majority report begins on a positive note. Verse 27. We went into the land to which you sent us.

And it does flow with milk and honey. Here is its fruit. The land of Canaan had lived up to all that the Israelites had been told it would be.

And the people didn't simply have to take the spies' word for it. They were shown evidence of the fruit that grew there. So far, so good. But then in verse 28, there is a but.

The land is fertile and fruitful. But the people who live there are powerful. And the cities are fortified and very large.

[6 : 10] We even saw descendants of Anak there. The descendants of Anak were giants. So the conclusion of the majority of the spies is, yes, it's a great land.

But the people are far too powerful for the Israelites to take on and defeat. They say in verse 31, we can't attack those people.

They are stronger than we are. Now the facts which the spies presented me well have been true.

The people living in Canaan were indeed strong and powerful.

Their cities were large and well defended. It's possible that some of the people living in Canaan were of unusual size. The problem was not that the facts were wrong.

Nor indeed was the conclusion the spies drew from the facts unreasonable. The people of the land were indeed too strong for the Israelites to attack in their own strength.

[7 : 14] But that fact didn't drive the spies to rely on their God. God doesn't receive a mention. The spies were thinking in purely human terms.

And in order to reinforce the message they wanted to get across, they began to exaggerate the negatives. As we are told in verse 32, they spread among the Israelites a bad report about the land they had explored.

No longer was Canaan a land flowing with milk and honey. Now, the spies told the Israelites it was a land which devoured those living in it.

No longer was it only some of the people who were giants. No, the spies now said, All the people we saw there are of great size.

They saw no harm in a little exaggeration if it would help to make their point. And their conclusion in verse 33 is, We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them.

[8 : 29] There is a degree of irony in that comment. You see, the spies now regarded themselves in the same way as they imagined the Nephilim regarded them.

They allowed their enemies' view of them to determine how they thought about themselves. What can we learn from this?

Well, let me highlight three things. First, we see how unbelief leaves God out of the picture. Canaan was the land of promise, the land God had promised to give to his people.

But the spies took no account of that. They left God out of the reckoning. All they were concerned about was how things looked from a purely human perspective.

They couldn't see past the evidence of their own eyes. The Israelites might have been no match for the people of Canaan.

[9 : 38] But were the inhabitants of Canaan too strong, too powerful for the Israelites' covenant-keeping God?

No mention was made of him. I wonder if you and I are sometimes tempted to leave God out of the picture.

That is a mark of unbelief. The second thing I would like you to note is that unbelief exaggerates the problems.

The spies discounted the positive evidence they had gathered and played up the problems. Instead of assessing things realistically, they exaggerated the negatives.

They failed to put their problems in the context of who their God was and what he had promised.

And as a result, the problems assumed a significance they should never have had.

[10 : 38] And it's the same with us. The opposite of faith is fear. And the more we give in to fear, the more we will find to be afraid of.

Unbelief exaggerates the problems. Thirdly, unbelief affects the way we see ourselves.

You see, the spies accepted the assessment their enemies had of them. We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes. And we looked the same to them.

And on that basis, the spies were all for pulling back from entering the land of Canaan. The same sort of thing may be true of us.

I wonder if we, in the 21st century, as Christians, accept the world's assessment of Christianity. Do we accept the view of Christianity which you'll find on BBC2?

[11 : 40] Do we accept the media's assessment of us when it seeks to undermine the basis of our faith and ridicule us for what we stand for? How sad if, because of what our enemies think, we begin to see ourselves as grasshoppers in our own eyes.

Because it's the people who know their God who will do exploits. Can you see yourself in the majority of the spies, in the way the majority of the spies saw things?

I think I can. Do you sometimes look at your circumstances from a purely human perspective? You may be up against major problems.

There may be giants blocking your way too. But if you're a Christian, are you forgetting that the Lord is with you? Are you trusting in Him, confident that His grace is sufficient?

That His strength is made perfect in weakness? It's not just individuals. Churches and denominations too may be guilty of unbelief.

[12 : 56] The Lord is committed to building His church. The gates of Hades will not overcome it. But where the Lord's people are unbelieving and refuse to trust Him, there will be no significant forward movement.

Unbelief undermines churches as well as individuals. Whatever our circumstances then, let's not leave God out of the reckoning.

Let's not exaggerate the problems. And let's not allow unbelief to blind us as Christians to our privileged status in Christ as heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ.

Unbelief demonstrated. Second day in verse 30 of chapter 13 and verses 5 to 9 of chapter 14 we have faith articulated.

Unbelief demonstrated. Faith articulated. When the majority of the spies had given their essentially negative report we are told that another of the spies a man called Caleb called for silence and his message for the people was that they should go up and take possession of the land.

[14 : 21] We should go up he says in verse 30 and take possession of the land for we can certainly do it. Was it bravado that made Caleb speak like that?

Did Caleb just happen to have a gung-ho attitude? Not at all it was trust in God that motivated him. We see that from what he and his fellow spy Joshua said to the Israelite assembly later on.

Look at verses 8 and 9 of chapter 14. If the Lord is pleased with us he will lead us into that land a land flowing with milk and honey and will give it to us.

Only do not rebel against the Lord and do not be afraid of the people of the land because we will swallow them up. Why? Their protection is gone but the Lord is with us.

Do not be afraid of them. Caleb and Joshua knew that the Lord was committed to his people and would be with them. They could trust his promise.

[15 : 31] Yes, the people of Canaan were intimidating but they didn't have God on their side. They couldn't possibly resist the God of Israel. The Israelites by contrast had the protection of their mighty God as long as they honoured him.

and did not rebel against him. It's interesting, isn't it, that the unbelieving spies were afraid of the people of Canaan. But what Caleb and Joshua were afraid of was that the Israelites would displease the Lord.

They urged the people not to be afraid of the people of Canaan. Instead, they were to fear God and to please him. It reminds me of Tate and Brady's paraphrase of the 34th Psalm.

Fear ye the Lord and you will then have nothing else to fear. Make you his service, your delight, your wants shall be his care.

That is faith articulated. Faith in a mighty God. In verse 24 of chapter 14, the Lord says of Caleb that he has a different spirit and follows me wholeheartedly.

[16 : 59] You see, Caleb and Joshua followed the Lord. They trusted him and so they didn't share the negative mindset of their fellow spies. They had a completely different perspective on the situation.

I wonder what kind of spirit you and I have. Can it be said of us that we follow the Lord wholeheartedly? Do we focus on him rather than on our circumstances?

Do we trust him as the one who is able to do in us and for us more than we can ask or even imagine? Unbelief demonstrated.

Faith articulated. Thirdly and finally, repercussions described. Repercussions described. I would like to mention very briefly four things.

First, we see in verses 1-4 of chapter 14, the destructive effects of unbelief. The destructive effects of unbelief.

[18:10] In response to the negative report of the ten spies, we are told that that night all the people of the community raised their voices and wept aloud.

All the Israelites grumbled against Moses and Aaron and the whole assembly said to them, 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 would be taken as plunder, wouldn't it be better for us to go back to Egypt?

They were all for choosing a leader to return to Egypt. See what happened. The Israelites as a whole accepted what the ten spies said, hook, line, and sinker.

The unbelief of just ten men had a powerful and destructive influence on the entire community. The spies were no doubt pushing at an open door, but the fact remains that their unbelief influenced others.

That is a warning for us that your unbelief and mine may affect more than just ourselves. But note too how unbelief warped the Israelites thinking.

[19:33] In accepting what the spies said, they forgot what they had previously believed. No longer was Canaan the land God had promised to give them. Now in their minds it was no more than killing fields where they were going to be slaughtered.

Why is the Lord bringing us to this land only to let us fall by the sword? Not only that, but in wanting to return to Egypt, the Israelites forgot all about their suffering there.

They forgot how hard life had been for them when they were there. Their slavery and suffering were conveniently overlooked. Unbelief is destructive in its effects.

It warps our thinking. And so we need to consider the effect our unbelief can have on others. And we need to recognize how easily unbelief can skew our thinking and attitudes.

The second thing I'd like you to note is that unbelief is potentially serious. We read in verse 10 how as the assembly talked about stoning Caleb and Joshua because they didn't like what they were saying, the glory of the Lord appeared at the tent of meeting to all the Israelites.

[20:58] Now that was ominous. The Lord's manifesting his presence in this instance was a mark of his displeasure. His words to Moses in verse 11 are significant.

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?

The Lord obviously didn't see the Israelites' complaints as an unfortunate wobble. He saw that behind their complaints was a willful and persistent refusal to believe in him.

The Israelites refused to believe in the face of overwhelming evidence. They had seen all that he had done among them. They had experienced so much of his love and faithfulness.

But they refused to believe. And they had repeatedly rebelled against the Lord. In verse 22 the Lord speaks of them as having disobeyed and tested me ten times.

[22:10] This wasn't the first time that the Israelites refused to trust him. And it is for these reasons that the Lord accused them of treating him with contempt.

I wonder if you and I regard our unbelief, our failure to trust the Lord, as amounting to treating him with contempt.

I suspect not. but in the Lord's eyes, persistent unbelief is equivalent to treating him with contempt.

Unbelief is a serious matter. Thirdly, unbelief has consequences. All unbelief has consequences.

But the pattern of unbelief which culminated in this incident had particularly serious consequences. consequences. The Lord was disposed to strike the Israelites down with a plague and make a fresh start with Moses.

[23:15] Verse 12 But Moses pleaded with the Lord on behalf of his people. He pointed out that God's honour was at stake. Verse 15 Moses asked the Lord to demonstrate his character as a God slow to anger, abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion.

And to forgive the Israelites their sin. in accordance with his great love. And the Lord acceded to Moses' request. He assured Moses in verse 20, I have forgiven them as you asked.

But there were still consequences. None of the men who had seen what the Lord had done for Israel in Egypt and in the desert but had rebelled and disobeyed would enter the promised land. Verse 29 In this desert your bodies will fall. Every one of you twenty years old or more who was counted in the census and who has grumbled against me.

What a tragedy. None of those who had left Egypt would actually enter the land of Canaan. They would be reduced to wandering about in the desert until the last of them died.

[24 : 55] only then would the next generation take possession of the land. That was a severe judgment and yet judgment was mixed with mercy.

The Lord didn't abandon his people. He continued to feed them with manna from heaven. He still led them by means of the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night.

He still gave them on occasion victories against their enemies. but they did miss out on the great privilege of entering the land God had promised them.

Our unbelief too has consequences. Yes it can be forgiven. Praise God that that is so. The Lord can restore the years which the locusts have eaten.

but persistent willful unbelief may have consequences. Yes the Lord will still look after us because of his amazing electing grace.

[26 : 06] But we may miss out on the enjoyment of all that the Lord has to offer us. I heard someone say that if God's people do not trust his promises promises they will have their worst fears realised.

If God's people do not trust his promises they will have their worst fears realised. That is what happened to the Israelites to a great extent here.

They had refused to enter the land of Canaan because they were afraid they would fall by the sword. and now they were left wandering in the desert. They said oh it would be so much better for us to die in the desert.

And God said that is exactly what will happen to you. You will wander about in the desert and your bodies will fall in the desert. They had been afraid that their children would be taken as plunder.

Well says the Lord in verse 33 they will be shepherds here for forty years suffering for your unfaithfulness until the last of your bodies lies in the desert.

[27 : 19] Unbelief has consequences. The fourth thing I'd like to highlight is that those who stood out against the prevailing unbelief were rewarded.

Caleb and Joshua the two spies who had been prepared to trust the Lord were going to enter the land. There's an old Sunday school jingle which puts it like this Joshua the son of Nun and Caleb the son of Jephunneh were the only two who ever got through to the land of milk and honey.

That was because they trusted the Lord and they sought to obey him. They believed the Lord's promises Jesus and so they were prepared to obey his commands.

And they are set before us here as an example to follow. Faith in God is rewarded.

God this is not a comfortable passage for any of us.

[28 : 37] None of us can afford to sit in judgment on the Israelites and say well we would never do what they did if we had seen all that they saw we would never have refused to trust the Lord.

God yes their unbelief is almost incredible but all we have to do to understand it is to look at our own hearts.

The external difficulties and threats which we face as individual Christians and corporately as the Church of Christ may be very different from the challenges which faced the people of Israel here.

But I suspect that unbelief is just as much a problem for us as it was for them. The challenge for us is will we be like Caleb and Joshua?

Will we follow the Lord wholeheartedly? Only in dependence on his grace can we trust the promises and obey the commands?

[29 : 57] Shall we pray? Oh Lord we recognize that like the Israelites we sometimes sin against light.

we fail to trust you in spite of the evidence. We fail to obey you when we know what we should do.

Lord we recognize that none of us lives up to what we know. But we pray that you would graciously forgive our sins and that you would empower us afresh by your spirit.

we thank you for the example of Caleb who followed you wholeheartedly. We pray that you would make us the men and women you would want us to be.

May we live in the good of all that you have to offer your people. May we be those who follow you and trust you and obey you for your name's sake.
[31 : 11] Amen. Amen.