

Numbers 13

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[0 : 0 0] Now, I imagine that most of us here this evening are aware that quite a number of our young folk, teenagers and young folk, have been away this weekend in Aviemore, and a number of the brave souls are here this evening. I think they're to be commended for that, I would imagine. I may be wrong, but I imagine that sleep didn't occupy a significant part of the program, and so I would imagine that remaining awake throughout the service, especially throughout the sermon, could prove a considerable challenge, and if I'm misjudging you, then I'm sure you'll forgive me.

But conscious of that reality, and no doubt for the benefit of the rest of you, I'm giving myself the challenge of finishing before the hour, and I'm also conscious that this morning, those of you were here this morning, I made the mistake of trying to say too much. I don't know if that was obvious, maybe it was very obvious, and so in a way, I want to go in the other direction this evening, and choose my words more carefully and more economically. Well, we'll see if I do that or not, but that's the intention at any rate. Now, the subject matter that is before us is also, I hope, an exciting one, a gripping one. It's a good spy story. I don't know how many of you like spy stories.

Well, this is a spy story, and I hope that a good gripping spy story will also serve to keep our attention. This account of the twelve spies sent by Moses to stake out the promised land prior to taking possession of it, or certainly that was the intention. And the heart of the matter, or in any case, the aspect of the account that I want us to consider this evening is how the spies were divided into two very distinct groups. It was one group of spies, but as the account plays itself out, we see there's a clear division within these spies, two distinct groups that I'm calling the wimps and the warriors.

We want to compare and contrast these two groups within the dozen spies, the wimps and the warriors. Most of them were wimps, but there was a small group of two who we are calling the warriors.

And as well as comparing and contrasting these two groups, I also want to explore and ask the question, why were they so different? You know, why the difference between Joshua and Caleb and the rest?

[2 : 40] It's a very marked difference, as we'll see, but why? Why were they so different? Now, what do I hope that we will learn from this exercise? Well, I think it is the case that for us today as Christians, we will also fall into one or other group, wimps or warriors, and it is a good thing for us to see where we fit and what we can do about it if we are drawn to the maybe unpleasant conclusion that we are more of a wimp than a warrior. Now, in laying things out in this way, I am conscious and I do recognize that matters are seldom so black and white. Even the warriors amongst us will have their wimpy moments, and sometimes wimps can surprise themselves with an unexpected and welcome display of courage. But even though we recognize that things aren't as black and white as maybe I'm presenting them, I think there is merit in contrasting the spies and seeing how that reflects on ourselves. But before we do compare and contrast the spies that we read of in these accounts, we need to very quickly notice the historical occasion and some important ground rules for the intended conquest of the Promised Land. The occasion we can deal with very swiftly. God raised up Moses to lead the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt and homeward bound to the Promised Land. Now, of course, the Israelites that left Egypt had never lived there, but nonetheless, we can speak of that journey as a journey as a journey homeward bound. We're familiar with the events surrounding the crossing of the Red Sea and then how the people headed south to Mount Sinai where God gave them the law. From there, they headed north to Kadesh Barnea, a location mentioned in our readings. And there they are within striking distance of the Promised Land. It's just across the border. They can almost touch it. They're that close.

And this is the moment. This is the occasion that we are considering. And it is on this occasion that we can just notice some of the ground rules for this conquest, for this taking possession of the Promised Land that they are now about to embark on, or at least that was the intention. Three ground rules that we want to just quickly notice before moving on to think of the spies and contrast them. The first thing that we have to recognize is that the land belongs to God. This land that they are to take possession of, it belongs to God. It is, after all, the Promised Land, promised by God, and God would not promise to His people that which He did not own. Now, we might say, well, that's a very obvious thing to say. And you might also say, well, is it not the case that the earth is the Lord's in the fullness thereof, as we sing in the psalm? And of course, that is true. The whole universe belongs to God. But it was particularly and in a special way true of the land of Canaan, that it belonged to God. Yes, others were occupying it, but the land belonged to God. That's one thing we have to be very clear on. The other thing that we can identify as a ground rule for conquest is that the land was promised to God's people. Now, the promise had been made hundreds of years before this occasion, but the passage of time in no way diluted the promise and the necessity of the promise being kept by God. God was, if you wish, duty-bound by His own word, by His own commitment to His people to keep His promise and to give them the promised land. And the third ground rule that we can just notice is this, that the people, the Israelites, led by God, led by the Lord, are responsible for taking possession of the land. It belongs to God. It's been promised to them, but they have to take possession of it. Not alone. He will go before them. He will lead them into battle, but they are involved. They are to take possession of the land. And as we think about these ground rules, and especially as we want to ensure that what we're saying bears some relevance to ourselves in our own lives and work and witness as believers, as we consider our calling as Christians, we do well to remember similar ground rules. This world where God has placed us, hostile though it may be, belongs to God, belongs to God, and God has promised to be with us as we go into all of His world to take possession of it for Him.

Now, our concern, of course, unlike the Israelites on the occasion that we're considering, is not to take possession of a physical or geographical kingdom, but for being involved with God in gathering in all of God's elect people in all the world. And as we engage in that task, as we busy ourselves in this mission that we have been given, we should conduct ourselves, conduct ourselves in this world not as tentative and timorous trespassers, but as sons and daughters of the owner, for this is God's world where He has placed us. Well, having noted these ground rules, we can move on and think of the spies. We want to compare and contrast the spies. But even before we do that, just one intriguing detail I want to comment on and really leave for you to maybe think about yourselves. And the question really is this, or the intriguing detail we can pose in the form of a question, and it is this, why send spies at all? The account is about the sending of these spies, but if we just take a wee step back and ask that question, I don't know if it's something you've ever thought about. Well, why send spies at all? If the land belongs to God, as we've made very clear, if God has promised the land to His people, as He clearly had, and indeed, if God had promised to go before them in the conquest, to lead them into the promised land, then why send spies at all? Why send spies to that which you own? You don't send spies to stake out something you already own. Now, the passage in Numbers that we read at the beginning of chapter 13 would seem to suggest that it is God who decided that spies should be employed.

Notice there in verse 1 of chapter 13, the Lord said to Moses, Send some men to explore the land of Canaan, for I am giving to the Israelites, which I am giving to the Israelites, and then he goes on. However, it's interesting when we compare that with what we read in Deuteronomy, and in chapter 1 and verses 21 and 22, where we have not a contradictory account by any means, but a different one that I think we'll find can be reconciled, but different nonetheless.

In Deuteronomy chapter 1 and verses 21 and 22, what do we read? Here, Moses is speaking, and he says to the people, See, the Lord your God has given you the land.

[10:27] Go up and take possession of it, as the Lord, the God of your fathers, told you. Do not be afraid. Do not be discouraged. And then notice what it says, Then all of you came to me, that is the people, they came to Moses, and they said, Let us send men ahead to spy out the land for us, and bring back a report about the route we are to take, and the towns we will come to. And then we read in verse 23 that Moses reminds himself of the occasion by saying, The idea seemed good to me. So, while it is true that Moses agreed with the suggestion, and evidently God Himself was willing to go along with the suggestion, and so He then tells Moses, You know, Send the spies. It is the people who had first suggested that this would be the way to go. And their reasoning might appear defensible. They simply want to establish the best route to take and what awaits them along that route. But I do wonder, and I think really all we can do is wonder, but I wonder if that is all that was behind this proposal that came from the people that spies be sent before taking possession of the land.

Might it be that behind this seemingly sensible proposal there lurks fear and unbelief, and they're being told, Take possession of the land, but they want to send some spies first just to establish what awaits them as they would take possession of the land. Well, I don't know if perhaps there was that behind this proposal that was accepted by Moses and indeed by God.

What I would say is this, as we think about this matter of the people, and if you wish, postponing the taking possession of the land by this proposal, I think it is true for us that we need to be careful in our work in extending God's kingdom. We need to be careful that we're not so busy thinking about it and exploring options and strategizing, if indeed we do that at all, that we forget to conquer. The matter that we are called to is to conquer, not to think about it, not just to plan about it, but to do it. Perhaps the people were a little reluctant on that front.

Well, I leave that for your consideration, but what about the spies? The point is that ultimately, spies are sent. And as we've noticed, these spies, these 12 spies can be contrasted, 10 of them who we're calling wimps, maybe a little unfairly, and two who we're calling warriors. And we can compare and contrast these spies by noting three realities that their mission reveals as they conduct themselves, as they go about the business of this mission that they have been given. Three things.

The first thing we can say is this, that they heard the same message. All of them heard the same message, but some of them, the wimps, obeyed only in part, while the warriors, Caleb and Joshua, obeyed in full. And what was the message that they heard? Well, in Numbers chapter 13, they are given a particular commission by Moses in chapter 13 and from verses 17 to 20. We won't read it again, but we read the passage that when Moses sent them to explore Canaan, he said, go up through the Negev and on into the hill country. And then we have this very detailed description of what it is they are to do. You know, the exploration that they are going to be involved in, the information they need to secure, very clear and detailed instructions are given to all of the spies, and they all hear this message. But of course, that's not all that they are told. If we go to Deuteronomy in chapter 1 and in verse 21, we find another message that is directed to them all. In actual fact, this message is directed to all of the people, but also, and perhaps you might say with particular relevance to the spies as they embark on their mission.

[14 : 51] In Deuteronomy 1 and in verse 21, see, the Lord your God has given you the land. Go up and take possession of it. As the Lord, the God of your fathers told you, do not be afraid, do not be discouraged. The message is the same. There are specific tasks that they need to perform, and there is a manner in which they are to perform it. They are not to be afraid, and they are not to be discouraged. So, they heard the same message. But what is their response to the message? Well, in fairness to all of the spies, all of them participate fully in the mission. This was no simple mission. It wasn't simply an overnight foray into the southernmost tip of the promised land to have a look and then come back. No, they spent 40 days. They traveled from south to north and back again. This was a significant spying mission, no doubt carrying with it considerable danger. And all of them, to their credit and in fairness, all of them participate and participate fully.

They do what they were told to do. They bring back to Moses the information that Moses had asked them to secure. So, they obey. All of them obey that part of the message they were given. But of course, there was more to the message. They were told, do not be afraid. They were told, do not be discouraged.

But only Caleb and Joshua obey that part of the message. Indeed, those who disobey that part of the message not only are guilty of being afraid and of being discouraged, and though that language may seem harsh, being guilty of being harsh, being guilty of being discouraged, I think it's legitimate language.

God commands them not to be afraid, not to be discouraged. But they are. But not only that, they instill fear and spread discouragement among others in due course. So, they heard the same message.

Some of them, two of them, obeyed all of the message, and others only some of it. I think for us, it's salutary to just remember that in our work for God, it's not just about what we do, but how we do it.

[17 : 10] You see, all of the spies did what they were told, and that is to their credit. But it's not just about fulfilling a task. It's also about the manner in which we do so. And in this, only Caleb and Joshua can be commended. So, they heard the same message. But the second thing we can say as we compare and contrast these spies is this, that they saw the same land, but they saw the land with a very different perspective. They all came to the conclusion that it was a good land. They would have won mind in that regard. There in verse 25 of Deuteronomy chapter 1, the report of all of them is, it is a good land that the Lord our God is giving us. And so, though on that account or on that front they would agree, they do see the land. All of them think it's a good land, but they see that good land from a different perspective. The wimps, if we can call them that, well, we already are calling them that, compared what they saw, this good land, they compared what they saw to themselves.

And I'll explain what I mean by that in a moment. While the warriors, Caleb and Joshua, compared what they saw, they saw the same thing, but they compared what they saw to God.

So, let me develop that. The wimps saw the fortified city, and they compared the fortified city to their own strength, to their own military prowess and experience. They saw the giants, and they compared the giants to their own size and strength. There in verse 28 of Deuteronomy chapter 1, we find this summarized very clearly. There we read, it's really the people summarizing what these ten spies have reported. The people are stronger and taller than we are. The cities are large with walls up to the sky.

Well, a little bit of poetic license there in terms of the size of the walls, but particularly the first part, the people are stronger and taller than who? Than we are. You see, they're seeing the people, and they're comparing the people to themselves. And of course, you say, well, they're much bigger than us.

You see, that is their perspective. But Caleb and Joshua, they have a different perspective. They see the same people. They're just as big. They're the same size. They're just as strong. But they see what they see and compare what they see to God and to His strength. And of course, they're seeing the same thing, but from a completely different perspective. And it makes all the difference. So, they heard the same message. Some of them obeyed it in its entirety, others only partially. They saw the same land, but they saw it from a very different perspective. And thirdly, as we compare and contrast these spies, we can say this, they participated in the same mission, the same spying mission, but they came to very different conclusions. In Numbers chapter 13, verses 30 and 31, the contrast between the two is very clearly expressed. Numbers chapter 13, verses 30 and 31, we read, Then Caleb silenced the people before Moses and said, We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it. That's one perspective, one conclusion from the mission they've been on. We can certainly do it. But then we read in verse 31, but the men who had gone up with him, clearly excluding Joshua, said, We can't attack those people. They are stronger than we are. So, the contrast is very clear. We can or we can't.

[21 : 02] They were engaged in the same mission. They'd been to the same places. They'd seen exactly the same thing. Two of them conclude, We can't, and the rest conclude, We can't. That sounds very contemporary.

Is that not, is the scene here not reenacted? Often in our own churches and congregations, as we consider what it is we would do for God, there are those who very quickly conclude, We can't. We can't do it.

It's too big. It's too difficult. It's beyond our capacity. We can't do it. And others who say, Well, yes, we can. We certainly can. With God's help, we can. Well, I wonder where we stand in that matter. So, the spies compared and contrasted. We see a very pronounced contrast between them.

And what I want to do as we draw things to a close is this. I want to close by asking, Why was there this difference between Caleb and Joshua and the rest? We tend to go into the story just imagining from the very beginning, Well, yes, Caleb and Joshua, they're heroes, they're warriors, they're brave, they're courageous, and the others, well, they weren't. But when we're told about the men who were selected, the impression given is that they were of a similar caliber in terms of their leadership skills, in terms of their strength. And yet, there is this huge contrast between them when it comes to actually participating in their mission. Why? Why the difference? And of course, as we ask that question of the spies, and as we would ask that question in seeking to understand why Caleb and Joshua were so different from the rest, the question also comes to ourselves.

Why is it that many of us are so timorous? Why are so many of us wimps in the service of God, and so few warriors in the mold of Caleb and Joshua? Why this difference? And as we explore that question, or hopefully more than explore it, come to some answers, we can do so by posing three questions. The questions are posed of the spies, but equally they are posed of us, and we'll pose them more in that very practical way of ourselves. The first question is this, who do you fear more?

[23 : 30] You see, among the spies there were those who feared the giants more, whereas Caleb and Joshua feared God more. And who you fear will determine who you are and how you live. And so, that question I pose to you, who do you fear more? Who do you fear more? Are you more afraid of the big bad world, of the opinion of others, of the prospect of failure and ridicule? Or do you fear God? Who you fear will, and I repeat, who you fear will determine who you are and how you live. But the next question that would help us to establish why the difference is this, who do you trust more? The wimps, they trusted in themselves.

And so, when they are confronted with stronger and more powerful enemies, they came to a reasonable conclusion given who they were trusting in. Given that they were trusting in themselves, when they see these warriors, these strong and powerful men, it's not unreasonable that they would have concluded, well, we can't take possession of the land. The problem is who they are trusting in. They're trusting in themselves. Whereas Joshua and Caleb are trusting in God. And so, had there been a legion of Goliaths standing in their way from taking possession of the land, that was not going to shape their confidence. The victory that they were sure could be secured was not to be gained by their strength or their military prowess, but by God Himself, who would go before them. And so, who they are trusting is crucial. And that's true for us also. What about you? If you try and do the Lord's work, and it's good if that is what you wish to do, but if you try and do the Lord's work trusting in yourself, you will fail. You will, sooner or later, invariably lose heart. But if you trust in the Lord, then that is a different matter altogether. Who do you fear more? Who do you trust more? And finally, where do you think you stand in God's estimation? In our account, we are presented with a striking contrast. In Deuteronomy 1, verses 26 and 27, we read as follows. Deuteronomy 1, 26 and 27.

Listen to what the people say. It is the people speaking, but it seems to me reasonable to say that this would reflect the views of the ten spies. And what do we read there? It's Moses who's addressing them and reminding them of what it was that they said. We'll read from verse 27, you grumbled in your tents and said, and this is the part that I want you to focus on. Listen to what they say. The Lord hates us, so He brought us out of Egypt to deliver us into the hands of the Amorites to destroy us. This is what they think. This is the view they have of what God thinks of them. The Lord hates us. Now contrast that with Numbers chapter 14 and verses 6 to 8. We didn't read those verses. It's the continuing account in Numbers. But listen to what we read there. Numbers 14, verses 6 to 8. And it's Joshua who is speaking here. Joshua, son of Nun, and Caleb, son of Jephunneh, who were among those who had explored the land, tore their clothes, and said to the entire Israelite assembly, the land we passed through and explored is exceedingly good. And then we read, if the Lord is pleased with us, or that can be perhaps more helpfully translated, if the Lord delights in us, if the Lord delights in us, He will lead us into that land. We don't need to read any further. So you have this dramatic contrast. On the one hand, you have those who say, the Lord hates us. That is their estimation of what God thinks of them. The Lord hates us.

And you have Joshua and Caleb speaking of God's delight in His people. And that is a huge contrast, and what a huge difference this will make in our service to God. What it is that you consider is God's opinion, God's estimation of you. Now it may be that you may never say or even believe that the Lord hates you. I hope and trust that that is so. But how firm is your conviction that the Lord delights in you, that He loves you with an eternal and unchanging love? You see, to live secure in the knowledge of God's love for us is vital to useful and courageous Christian service.

if we are persuaded, and if we are able with security and conviction to say, He loves me. And because He loves me, He will help me. Because He loves me, He will strengthen me.

[28 : 44] Because He loves me, He will equip me. Because He loves me, He will use me. Because He loves me, He will protect me. And He will do all of these things because He loves me. And if we are sure of that, and if we are secure in that, what a difference it will make to our service for Him. So, these questions, I think, help us to understand why there was this great difference between Joshua and Caleb and the rest. And what of ourselves? What of you? A wimp or a warrior? Well, who do you fear more? Who do you trust more? Where do you think you stand in God's estimation? Are you persuaded of and secure in His love for you? Let us pray.