

Sermon outline and notes prepared by:

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Numbers 13:17-14:11 “Unbelief Is Defeat; Faith Is Victory!”

Intro. At this point in the story of Israel’s journey through the wilderness, they had reached the threshold of entering into the Promised Land. They were free men, ready to take possession of their inheritance that God had promised them and their forefathers long ago. God said it was a good land, flowing with milk and honey. In other words it would sustain a good, joyful life in their new homeland.

Then they faced a major problem. On the brink of the decision to enter the land, Israel refused to make an attempt. They began to turn away before the first battle was even engaged. Their real problem was not the strength of the enemy, but the weakness of their faith. This is clearly stated by the Lord himself in chapter 14, v.11, “How long will they not believe Me...?” We are going to see in this text of Scripture how their lack of faith causes them to lose what they had come out of Egypt to gain. Instead of taking possession of the good land and enjoying the fruits of it, their unbelief would cause them to spend the rest of their lives in the wilderness.

I want to suggest to you that unbelief is still a big problem today. There are so many blessings & so many victories that the Lord would give us, but our own unbelief stands in the way. I hope this message today will lead you to honestly assess how much unbelief is a problem in your own life, and cause you to earnestly desire to have greater faith in the Lord.

The first main point I want to get across from this text of Scripture is this:

I. GUARD AGAINST THE PROBLEM OF UNBELIEF

Note with me the many problems that can result from unbelief:

A. Unbelief Leads to Undue Caution – Back in v.2 the Lord said, “Send men to spy out the land of Canaan. As a result, v.17 says, “Then Moses sent them to spy out the land of Canaan...” The heads of the tribes of Israel named in vv.4-15 were sent on a mission to spy out the land. However, when you compare the account of this same story in Deuteronomy 1:22ff, we discover that the idea to send out spies actually originated from the people. God permitted it, and Moses approved of the plan (1:23). As a result here in numbers 13 we see that the plan was executed. They did a thorough 40-day investigation of the land, from the southern end to the northern end. They probably journeyed near the coast, and down the Jordan valley. Yet God had already told them on numerous occasions that the land was a good land, flowing with milk and honey (Ex. 3:8; 3:5, 17; 33:3; Lev. 20:24). Why did they need 12 men to confirm what God had said? Could they not believe God’s Word? God had already told them & their forefathers on at least 20 occasions that He would give them the land to possess (Gen. 12:7; 13:15, 17; 15:7; 17:8; 24:7; 26:3; 28:4, 13; 35:12; 48:4; Ex. 6:4, 8; 12:25; 13:5; Lev. 14:34; 20:24; 23:10; 25:2; 25:38). So what did it matter if the people were few or many, strong or weak, in open camps or in strongholds? While generally speaking it is prudent to know the strengths and weaknesses of your enemy, but with God on their side they could defeat large armies with strong warriors, even if there were fortified walls between them. No, the sending of the spies denoted a weakness and fear on the part of the people. Cowardice, disguised as prudence, called for further information.

But that is so characteristic of unbelief. Instead of acting on the command and promise of the Lord, it causes us to be cautious, to form a committee to investigate the feasibility of the task at hand. The best way to kill an idea is to form a study committee.

We have a major problem in our country. The federal government is drowning in debt, largely because politicians can't stop making promises to spend money we don't have. So what do we do? The president appoints the debt commission to study the problem and propose solutions. They made their recommendations, and nothing has been done. Congress could not do its job to cut spending, so what did they do? They appointed a "Super Committee" of 12 to come up with at least 1.2 trillion in deficit reduction over 10 years. What was result of that? They couldn't even agree on a plan. Nothing has been done!

So when we are faced with a big problem or a big task, don't appoint committee. Ask God to raise up leaders with vision and great faith, and follow them. Don't disguise distrustful fears under the pretext of "knowing a little more about it first."

There is another problem with unbelief:

B. Unbelief Minimizes the Benefits and Magnifies the Obstacles - When the 10 spies returned from their extensive investigation of the land, they called together "all the congregation" (13:26) & gave their much-anticipated report. First, the majority report was given. They acknowledged in v.27 that the land was indeed a good land. They said, "It truly flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit." As we see in vv.23-24 that their report even included a "show and tell," displaying the pomegranates, the figs, and a large cluster of grapes, so large that two men carried it between them on the pole.

Then one word revealed their unbelief when they said, "Nevertheless...." The negative part of their initial report was twice as long as the positive part. The unbelieving cowards really had gone to look for dangers, and of course they found them. In vv.28-29 they said, "Nevertheless the people who dwell in the land are strong; the cities are fortified and very large; moreover we saw the descendants of Anak there. The Amalekites dwell in the land of the South; the Hittites, the Jebusites, and the Amorites dwell in the mountains; and the Canaanites dwell by the sea and along the banks of the Jordan." Then after Caleb attempted to give the positive perspective of faith, they went on to say in v.31, "We are not able to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we...." Then in vv.32-33 they added, "The land through which we have gone as spies is a land that devours its inhabitants, and all the people whom we saw in it are men of great stature. There we saw the giants (the descendants of Anak came from the giants); and we were like grasshoppers in our own sight, and so we were in their sight." After they concluded their report, they must have had the smug satisfaction that they had done their job, & the conclusion was obvious. They could have said, "We report; you decide," and been confident of the result.

But was their focus on the goodness of the land and the great potential for blessing? Or was their focus on the obstacles to possessing the land? Their own unbelief was causing them to look at the goodness of the land through the big end of a telescope, and the obstacles of the land through the small end of the telescope. They truly magnified the obstacles, which were real enough, but they did not even give a fair assessment of them. Though there were indeed some cities with high walls such as Jericho in the Jordan Valley, and Jerusalem in the hill country, archaeology has revealed that there were not very many fortified & well populated cities at this time. Much of the hill country was sparsely populated. Determined to depress, they characterized Canaan as a Jurassic Park inhabited by humanasauruses (Nephilim), who made them look like grasshoppers (13:33). Though there were indeed some Goliaths in the land, they were no doubt in the minority, and to view themselves as grasshoppers in comparison was

putting things way out of perspective. You see, they forgot to include God in the equation. When you see yourself as a grasshopper in the presence of giants, that is precisely when you need God.

Folks, when you are afraid, you have lost your faith, & difficulties and problems are magnified. But when you believe in God your enemies and obstacles are small compared to God. Don't let potential difficulties blind you to God's power to help.

Unbelief leads to yet another problem:

C. Unbelief Spreads like a Disease - After the majority gave their pessimistic report, notice in chapter 14 how the report infected the congregation. V.1 says, "So all the congregation lifted up their voices and cried, and the people wept that night." Their unbelief infected the whole congregation. Notice how that is emphasized in our text. V.2 says, "And all the children of Israel complained against Moses and Aaron, and the whole congregation said...." V.10 says, "And all the congregation said to stone them with stones," that is Moses, Aaron, and probably the two that gave the minority report. Humans are prone to unbelief anyway, and when they heard the majority express unbelief, they easily expressed the same unbelief, for surely the majority are right! As a result, the tempest of emotion settled down into a full-blown and universal determination to give up the prize which hung within their reach.

This truth tells us that we must be on our guard against allowing the unbelief of the majority to infect us as well. True believers have almost always been in a significant minority, and we must not allow ourselves to be swayed by the popular opinion of unbelief. A 1991 Gallup poll of Americans found that about 5% of scientists (including those with training outside biology) identified themselves as creationists. Yet professor and author Brian Alters boastfully states that "99.9 percent of scientists accept evolution." Even if that's true, I would say that 99.9% of the Israelites in the desert did not believe they could take the Promised Land. Who was ultimately correct? Only four out of several million! As we move into the last days it will seem the whole world will follow after the antichrist and trust in his plan to deal with the massive problems this world will face. Yet the last book of the Bible reveals how terribly wrong the vast majority of people will be. Don't let the spiritual disease of unbelief infect you! Don't be quick to follow the crowd. Let your faith in God be your anchor as the waves of unbelieving public opinion pound against you.

D. Unbelief Is a Serious Rejection of God - As God responds to the situation, He says in v.11, "How long will these people reject Me?" The word translated "reject," actually is a stronger word. It means, "despise." You see, unbelief is an insult to the character & person of God. Not only was it an affront to the power of God, but even to the love of God. Notice what they said in v.3, "Why has the LORD brought us to this land to fall by the sword, that our wives and children should become victims?" Unbelief caused them to question God's motive for bringing them out of Egypt. They suggested that He was leading them into a trap. Like a hunter may put down the trail of food leading to a trap, even so God gave them manna in their wilderness journey only to leave them into Canaan to be destroyed by the inhabitants there. They suggested that God did not even care what happened to their children!¹ Thus, unbelief led them to reject God, reject His appointed leaders, and choose the slave masters of Egypt over their God & loving Redeemer (v.4). Unbelief brought them to the point that they concluded that *God* was their enemy!

¹ It was their children who ultimately took possession of the land!

The author of Hebrews gives his own application to the story. In Hebrews 3:12 he says, “Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God.”

E. Unbelief Can Be Obstinate – This is brought out in the last of v.11, “And how long will they not believe Me, with all the signs which I have performed among them?” Their unbelief was incredible. Only recently God had demonstrated His power & love by providing abundant meat in the wilderness, enough to fill the stomachs of a multitude for 30 days (chapter 11). The miracle of manna happened every morning. Didn’t God continue to guide them with a pillar of fire by night, and a cloud by day? They could still recall the 10 plagues in Egypt, the parting of the Red Sea, and the great victory over the armies of Egypt. Yet in spite of all these miracles which they had seen with their own eyes, they did not trust God enough to do any more miracles on their behalf.

Obstinate unbelief is still with us today. To me, the evidence of divine creation is overwhelming. Romans 1:20 says, “For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse.” So great an effect like creation must have an even greater Cause. And creation gives clear evidence that God is powerful and brilliant beyond imagination. Likewise, I believe the evidence of the resurrection & deity of Jesus Christ is overwhelming. We have documents from the lifetime of many eyewitnesses of the resurrection. No other ancient historical event has so much documentation of so many eyewitnesses. And yet, many people give little or no evidence that they believe in a Creator and risen Lord to whom they are accountable! After all, as James said, “faith without works is dead” (2:20). Real faith is not evidenced by words, but by a person’s life.

If you have yet to believe in Jesus, you need to abandon the fantasy that your unbelief is well justified. Our text provides ample evidence that the real problem with unbelief is not lack of evidence. The real problem is the sinful heart. The real problem is an unwillingness to repent of sin. Only God can cure that problem. That is why we must pray for unbelievers, that God would enable them to believe. If you have yet to believe in Christ, let go of your unbelief, and turn to the Lord who is worthy of your faith. The author of Hebrews (3:15) says in response to this story, “Do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.”

There are other problems with unbelief in our text, such as the fact that it led to disappointment, sorrow (v.1), a complaining heart (v.2), fear (v.9), & even attempted murder (v.10). Later in the chapter we see that their unbelief caused them to lose the opportunity to possess the land (cf. Heb. 3:17-19). Now we understand why God permitted the spying expedition. It was to manifest their unbelief, which would have surely led to their defeat. I hope you can see what a major problem unbelief is. So let us guard against the problem of unbelief. Let us turn from it, and repent of it.

But our text not only talks about the problem of unbelief, but we see another important truth:

II. LET US EXERCISE FAITH IN GOD

Caleb, whose name means dog, exhibits a dogged determination to hold on to his faith in God in spite of the obstacles. He gave the minority report in the last of v.30, “Let us go up at once, and possess it; for we are well able to overcome it.” As we shall see later, when he said “we,” he included the Lord. Joshua joined Caleb in verbally expressing his faith in chapter 14. What an example they are to us!

Notice from our text what real faith in God will do for us:

A. Faith Focuses on the Promises of God - While the majority report focused on the obstacles, the believing minority's report focused on the blessings that could soon be theirs. They said in the last of v.7, "The land, which we passed through to search it, is an exceeding good land." In the Hebrew the word translated "exceeding" is repeated for emphasis. Then in the last of v.8 they remind the people of God's previous promise saying that the land "flows with milk and honey."

When you face an obstacle in life, don't focus on the greatness of the obstacle, but find a promise from God that you can claim in that situation.

B. Faith Relies on the Help of God - They say in the last of v.9, "the LORD is with us." The opposition was great and well defended, but they believed that they were no match for their God, who had already exhibited great power against their enemies. The majority had measured themselves against the trained soldiers and giants, and were in despair. But Caleb & Joshua measured the giants against God, and were jubilant. They do not dispute the facts, but they reverse the implied conclusion, because by faith they were relying on God's help. Here we see that faith is not just reciting a creed, but relying on God, who is the source of the doctrines we believe.

Because this is the season we emphasize international missions, I want to make application primarily to the missionary task. Satan would want us to believe that reaching all the nations with the gospel is impossible. Islam poses a powerful threat, and anyone who enters certain Islamic countries to share the gospel is subject to arrest, imprisonment, and even death. Communist countries like China continue to hinder the spread of the gospel. But though these enemies of the gospel are powerful, we must remember the promise of help that Jesus has given. When He gave His great commission to make disciples of all nations, He promised, "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." My nephew is in a country that is hostile to evangelistic missionary work. But we are trusting God protect him, and enable him to share Christ and strengthen the few believers that he can find.

Because faith relies on the help of God:

C. Faith Gives Courage and Confidence - While unbelief led to fear, the faith of Caleb and Joshua led them to have great courage in the face of a powerful enemy. Note their confidence in v.8, "He will bring us into this land and give it to us." Then in v.9 they said, "do not ... fear the people of the land, for they are our bread..." The majority report had stated in 13:32 that "the land... devours its inhabitants." Palestine was at the crossroads of the major civilizations of the ancient world. Evidently, the people heard reports that invading armies had suffered much bloodshed there. But Caleb and Joshua turned that around. Instead of the land devouring them, the inhabitants of the land will be devoured like bread by the armies of Israel! This was no swaggering boast, but calm, reasonable confidence, because it rested on this, "the Lord is with us." Then he gives another reason, "their protection has departed from them." That may be an allusion to God's promise to Abraham in Gen. 15:16, "But in the fourth generation they shall return here, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete." Now, since the people of the land had not repented of their vile wickedness, God was ready to withhold mercy and use Israel as His agent to judge them. No wonder, in Caleb's initial report, he said, "Let us go up at once and take possession, for we are well able to overcome it" (13:30). In today's vernacular, he says, "Let's roll!" As Max Lucado said, "Faith is the grit in the soul that puts the

dare into dreams.”² Faith is courage that conquers. Disbelief is cowardice that correctly assesses the impossibility of a situation but fails to take God into account. Faith gives us courage & confidence, because we believe that nothing is impossible with God (Lk. 1:37).

Caleb and Joshua acknowledge the one condition for victory. That is found in v.8, “If the LORD delights in us...” The Hebrew word also means “to take pleasure in.” Hebrews 11:6 says “without faith it is impossible to please Him.” Thus, the one condition of victory was faith. As the apostle John (1 Jn 5:4) and the hymn writer said, “Faith is the victory....”

If faith gives courage in the face of great obstacles, do you and I live as if we do in fact believe that God is alive? Last night at the Christmas dinner the topic of addiction came up. Smoking is a powerful addiction. Connie Ziegenfuss shared how God led her to give up smoking cold turkey. Shortly thereafter in the middle of the night a battle ensued. It was her & God against Satan & that addiction. By faith in God Connie won the victory! Folks, we’ve got to do more than just talk about faith. We need to put it into practice in our daily lives.

Conclusion: Though Caleb & Joshua were unable to persuade the obstinate unbelief of their countrymen, God honored their faith. At the moment when Israel was poised to stone them to death, God intervened in a big way. In the last of v.10 it says, “Now the glory of the LORD appeared in the tabernacle of meeting before all the children of Israel.” Normally that glory was hidden inside the tabernacle, but now it was manifested “before all the children of Israel.” Suddenly, the awestruck people dropped their stones, and turned away from the glory of the Lord in fear & dread. If you wholly follow the Lord and trust in Him, He will protect His own.

And remember this: Israel was shut out of Canaan by their unbelief. Even so, unbelief will shut you out of heaven unless you turn from it. So let us turn from the sin of unbelief, and remember that God is worthy of our trust. In so doing we will experience the blessings of faith. We will have courage, confidence, and victory as we lay claim to the promises of God.

Sources: Roy Gane, *The NIV Application Commentary: Leviticus, Numbers* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004); Two sermons from Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977 reprint); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 1 (Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Radio, 1981); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 4:10] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2011). Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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² M. Lucado, *When God Whispers Your Name* (Dallas: Word, 1994), 44.