

The Sin of Unbelief

Lesson Scope: Numbers 13-14

References in brackets refer to the lesson scope unless otherwise noted

Lesson Focus

Unbelief dogged Israel's steps from their very departure from Egypt. When Pharaoh's army was approaching, the children of Israel accused Moses instead of trusting God, who had just brought them out of Egypt with a mighty hand. The notes of the song of deliverance at the Red Sea had scarcely ceased to echo before the people were scolding Moses rather than trusting God to provide them water.

Now on the very border of the Promised Land, where there should have been joy, praise, and anticipation through faith, we find instead fear, weeping, murmuring, rebellion, and even threatened violence because of their unbelief.

"Now these things were our examples.... And they are written for our admonition" (1 Corinthians 10:6, 11). "So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief" (Hebrews 3:19). "Let us therefore fear, lest, a promise being left us of entering into his rest, any of you should seem to come short of it" (Hebrews 4:1). "Let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us" (Hebrews 12:1). What sin besets us first of all? The sin of unbelief.

Faith overcomes the humanly impossible through the power and promises of God. Unbelief fails in the conflict because of its distorted view of God and circumstances.

Human nature is naturally perverse. When God said to go into Canaan, the people said they would have been better off dying in the wilderness. When God said they would die in the wilderness, the people said they wanted to go into Canaan (14:39-45). Both staying out and going in were acts of disobedience and expressions of unbelief.

Lesson Aim: To see contrasts between faith and unbelief.

Theme Verses: [Hebrews 4:1-2](#). Let us therefore fear, lest, a promise being left us of entering into his rest, any of you should seem to come short of it. For unto us was the gospel preached, as well as unto them: but the word preached did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in them that heard it.

Lesson Text

"We Be Not Able to Go Up"

[Numbers 13:1-2](#) And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, ² Send thou men, that they may search the land of Canaan, which I give unto the children of Israel: of every tribe of their fathers shall ye send a man, every one a ruler among them.

[Numbers 13:26-33](#) And they went and came to Moses, and to Aaron, and to all the congregation of the children of Israel, unto the wilderness of Paran, to Kadesh; and brought back word unto them, and unto all the congregation, and shewed them the fruit of the land. ²⁷ And they told him, and said, We came unto the land whither thou sentest us, and surely it floweth with milk and honey; and this *is* the fruit of it. ²⁸ Nevertheless the people *be* strong that dwell in the land, and the cities *are* walled, *and* very great: and moreover we saw the children of Anak there. ²⁹ The Amalekites dwell in the land of the south: and the Hittites, and the Jebusites, and the Amorites, dwell in the mountains: and the Canaanites dwell by the sea, and by the coast of Jordan. ³⁰ And Caleb stilled the people before Moses, and said, Let us go up at once, and possess it; for we are well able to overcome it. ³¹ But the men that went up with him said, We be not able to go up against the people; for they *are* stronger than we. ³² And they brought up an evil report of the land which they had searched unto the children of Israel, saying, The land, through which we have gone to search it, *is* a land that eateth up the inhabitants thereof; and all the people that we saw in it *are* men of a great stature. ³³ And there we saw the giants, the sons of Anak, *which come of* the giants: and we were in our own sight as grasshoppers, and so we were in their sight.

[Numbers 14:2-4](#) And all the children of Israel murmured against Moses and against Aaron: and the whole congregation said unto them, Would God that we had died in the land of Egypt! or would God we had died in this wilderness! ³ And wherefore hath the LORD brought us unto this

land, to fall by the sword, that our wives and our children should be a prey? were it not better for us to return into Egypt? ⁴ And they said one to another, Let us make a captain, and let us return into Egypt.

"The LORD Is With Us"

Numbers 14:5-11 Then Moses and Aaron fell on their faces before all the assembly of the congregation of the children of Israel. ⁶ And Joshua the son of Nun, and Caleb the son of Jephunneh, *which were* of them that searched the land, rent their clothes: ⁷ And they spake unto all the company of the children of Israel, saying, The land, which we passed through to search it, *is* an exceeding good land. ⁸ If the LORD delight in us, then he will bring us into this land, and give it us; a land which floweth with milk and honey. ⁹ Only rebel not ye against the LORD, neither fear ye the people of the land; for they *are* bread for us: their defence is departed from them, and the LORD *is* with us: fear them not. ¹⁰ But all the congregation bade stone them with stones. And the glory of the LORD appeared in the tabernacle of the congregation before all the children of Israel. ¹¹ And the LORD said unto Moses, How long will this people provoke me? and how long will it be ere they believe me, for all the signs which I have shewed among them?

Numbers 14:24 ²⁴ But my servant Caleb, because he had another spirit with him, and hath followed me fully, him will I bring into the land whereinto he went; and his seed shall possess it.

Numbers 14:30 Doubtless ye shall not come into the land, *concerning* which I swear to make you dwell therein, save Caleb the son of Jephunneh, and Joshua the son of Nun.

Questions for Study

"We Be Not Able to Go Up"

1. Evaluate "we be not able to go up" from a human standpoint.
2. What good reasons supported the claims of Joshua and Caleb?
3. Why did the proposal to go back to Egypt make no sense?
4. How did God take the children of Israel at their word?
5. Why does doubt often seem more reasonable to us than faith?

"The LORD Is With Us"

6. Why were the believers, Joshua and Caleb, the ones who rent their clothes as a sign of distress?
7. Since God keeps His promises, how do we explain that He seemingly

broke His promise to lead Israel into Canaan?

8. What challenges does God set before us that correspond to the challenge Israel faced at this time?

9. What blessings can we expect to receive from God as we face these challenges?

Analyzing the Passage

Compare 13:2, in which the Lord commanded Moses to send spies into Canaan, with Deuteronomy 1:22-23, in which the children of Israel requested this. It seems that God directed Moses to send spies after the people asked to search out the land.

In 13:27-28, the spies admitted that the land was good, just as God had said, but they faithlessly exaggerated the difficulties of taking possession of the land.

The expression "eateth up the inhabitants thereof" (13:32) seems to be an attempt to portray the land as so rugged and dangerous that even giants succumbed.

In 13:33, how did the spies know how the Canaanites viewed them? Joshua and Caleb's declaration that "their defence is departed from them" (14:9) is more likely how the Canaanites viewed themselves. See Rahab's testimony in Joshua 2:9.

The faithless spies stirred up the people, who were ever ready to hurl their accusations (14:1-3). But the people also uttered a foolish and insincere wish, which was to become all too true for all but two of them (14:28-29).

The people's words in 14:3-4 show rebellion against God, a total rejection of His plan, and a complete absence of rational thinking. Would God have supplied them with manna all the way back to Egypt?

Each clause of 14:9 is a potential sermon in itself.

In 14:11, we find the deepest expression of God's heart—not mere impatience, but a desire that His people would trust Him after all He had done for them. In Joshua 14, we see the fulfillment of God's promise to Caleb in 14:24.

Principles and Applications

"We Be Not Able to Go Up"

1. Faith finds its basis in God's covenant promises (13:2). Notice the

present tense in the promise "which I give unto the children of Israel." As far as God was concerned, it was already done. He did not mind having His promises searched out, because He knew that everything He had promised was there.

2. Unbelief focuses on strong enemies and walled cities rather than on the good things God has promised (13:26-28). Once Israel moved into Canaan years later, giants fell and walls came crashing down. We have to tell ourselves the truth: "Yes, I see the problems, but I see God too. He has always been faithful to me. He is so great that He overwhelms my problems."

3. Faith moves forward in calm confidence (13:30). Caleb's statement was no rash boast, for his confidence was based on God. When he said "we," he included God. He had been watching God's movings in the past, and he had become more and more confident as he faced the future. "Be still, my soul: thy God doth undertake / To guide the future as He has the past."

4. Unbelief exaggerates difficulty (13:31-33). The report of the ten spies sounds like a contradiction—the land eats up the inhabitants, but somehow they came to be men of great stature! Comparing themselves to grasshoppers was hyperbole to say the least. Yet sometimes we feel like grasshoppers as we face our problems. At such moments, the Lord is watching us with interest!

5. Unbelief leads to murmuring and outright rejection of God's gracious provision (14:2, 4). As one doubts, so he murmurs. As he murmurs, so he rebels. Let us beware of nurturing a private root of bitterness that bears fruit we were not expecting.

"The LORD Is With Us"

6. Faith is grieved at the fruits of unbelief (14:5-6). Moses and Aaron fell on their faces; Caleb and Joshua rent their clothes. God Himself was deeply disappointed. He really had wanted to lead the children of Israel into the Promised Land. Now most of that generation would never see it.

7. Faith focuses on the providence and power of God (14:7-9). In their plea to their brethren, Joshua and Caleb mentioned the Lord three times. If He delights in us, why should He not provide? The challenges that lie ahead might turn out to our advantage. "They are bread for us," Joshua and Caleb said.

8. Unbelief provokes God's wrath (14:10–11). How could God have made it plainer during those impossible days in the wilderness that He is equal to every occasion? How many more miracles would have persuaded His people that He is faithful? "None is so blind as he who will not see," and none is in such danger of coming under God's wrath.

9. Faith realizes all God's promises and leaves an inheritance to future generations (14:24). The unbelief of other people did not ruin God's promises for Caleb. He had to wait forty-five more years, but he would be as strong then as when he first spied out the land (Joshua 14:10-11). Furthermore, that little clause "His seed shall possess it" carried enormous implications for his family. Not only his descendants, but we also, are blessed by his example and testimony.

10. Unbelief forfeits God's covenant and blessing (14:30). To forfeit is to lose what was yours by right. Of all famous fumbles, what we read about here was one of the worst. The Promised Land lay just ahead, but the Israelites turned away. The result? If God cannot keep one promise, He makes another. "Doubtless ye shall not come into the land."

Important Teachings

1. Faith finds its basis in God's covenant promises (13:2).
2. Unbelief focuses on strong enemies and walled cities rather than on the good things God has promised (13:26-28).
3. Faith moves forward in calm confidence (13:30).
4. Unbelief exaggerates difficulty (13:31-33).
5. Unbelief leads to murmuring and outright rejection of God's gracious provision (14:2, 4).
6. Faith is grieved at the fruits of unbelief (14:5-6).
7. Faith focuses on the providence and power of God (14:7-9).
8. Unbelief provokes God's wrath (14:10-11).
9. Faith realizes all God's promises and leaves an inheritance to future generations (14:24).
10. Unbelief forfeits God's covenant and blessing (14:30).

Answers to Questions

1. Evaluate "we be not able to go up" from a human standpoint. Militarily speaking, it was dangerous and probably suicidal to venture farther. When many Israelites tried to enter Canaan without God's bless-

ing the following day, they were roundly defeated (14:40-45).

2. What good reasons supported the claims of Joshua and Caleb?

God had proven Himself equal to every situation ever since Israel left Egypt. He had supplied them with food and water. The spies had returned from Canaan with evidence that everything God had said about it was true.

3. Why did the proposal to go back to Egypt make no sense? They would have to travel on their own, without God's supplies and protection. Once in Egypt, what would they do—make more bricks?

4. How did God take the children of Israel at their word? They said, "Would God we had died in this wilderness!" (14:2), and God made sure they did (14:28-29).

5. Why does doubt often seem more reasonable to us than faith?

We are often too shortsighted. We look at the present emergency or the impossible assignment but find it difficult to see God behind the scenes.

6. Why were the believers, Joshua and Caleb, the ones who rent their clothes as a sign of distress?

They understood God better than the others. No doubt they realized that the Israelites were not only losing a great opportunity but also were likely to be severely punished.

7. Since God keeps His promises, how do we explain that He seemingly broke His promise to lead Israel into Canaan?

The Israelites refused to accept His promise, and God would not override their choice. (He made no apologies for this, saying in 14:34, "And ye shall know my breach of promise.")

8. What challenges does God set before us that correspond to the challenge Israel faced at this time?

Most of us face such challenges as we move through life—a new job, a business venture, marriage, requests to write or teach or serve on a foreign field. Smaller challenges, such as starting a conversation with a stranger, can sometimes be especially difficult.

9. What blessings can we expect to receive from God as we face these challenges?

If we move under His blessing, we can expect to look back with satisfaction on the challenges we have faced. Even if we experience a degree of failure, we can know that God smiles upon our willingness to move ahead with Him.

Summarizing the Lesson

All twelve spies went on record by name as to where they stood (13:4-16). In the final roll call, so will we, and more than the Promised Land will be at stake. Will we be found faithful or faithless?

Research Guide

Looking up Kadesh-barnea may help you to understand the general location of the children of Israel when they sent out the twelve spies and listened to their report. Kadesh-barnea became a center around which they wandered as nomads during the next thirty-eight years.