



WHEN OBSTACLES GROW BIGGER THAN GOD

Numbers 13–14

God calls us to trust His promises and consistently live in accordance with them. He doesn't ask us to examine His promises in light of the current situation and determine whether we should believe them and act on them. This was Israel's fatal mistake.

The nation Israel is knocking on the door of the promised land. Here in Numbers chapter 13, they are in the wilderness of Paran at the southernmost edge of Canaan. Just imagine the anticipation of finally stepping into that land God had been promising them for centuries—a land flowing with milk and honey *has* to be a great place to live!

But keep in mind that God is not going to hand them the land on a silver platter. He's not just delivering the land to them; He wants to develop their faith in Him.

Numbers 13 begins with these words:

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "Send men to spy out the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the people of Israel. From each tribe . . . you shall send a man." (verses 1-2)

After listing their names and the tribes they represent, Moses sends these spies out with these instructions:

"Go up into the Negeb and go up into the hill country, and see what

the land is, and whether the people who dwell in it are strong or weak, whether they are few or many, and whether the land that they dwell in is good or bad, and whether the cities that they dwell in are camps or strongholds, and whether the land is rich or poor, and whether there are trees in it or not. Be of good courage and bring some of the fruit of the land." (verses 17-20)



Kadesh Barnea region



And off this handpicked search team goes for what would be nearly a five-hundred-mile round trip.¹ I suspect a planning committee is already working on the welcome-home-heroes party. The team travels through the desert of the Negeb in the south to Rehob in the north. In verse 23, we are told they stopped in a place near Hebron in the southern part of the country to get a cluster of grapes so big that “they carried it on a pole between two of them.”

After forty days, the spies return and in verse 27 begin their report to Moses: “We came to the land to which you sent us. It flows with milk and honey.” In other words, they affirm that the land allows the herds to flourish and give plenty of milk and the honey from the date palm tree nectar is abundant. This land is flowing with milk and honey. And as they hold up that huge cluster of grapes, the people are ready to start the celebration!

But in verse 28, the report takes a dark turn: “However, the people who dwell in the land are strong, and the cities are fortified and very large.” Fear immediately ripples through the crowd.

Then Caleb, one of the spies, steps forward in verse 30 and says, “Let us go up at once and occupy it, for we are well able to overcome it.” We learn a little later that one other spy, Joshua, stands with Caleb. But they’re in the minority.

The other ten spies talk about the giants in the land. They report here in verse 31, “We are not able to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we are.” And in verse 33 they declare, “We seemed to ourselves like grasshoppers [compared] to them.”

By the way, forty years after this, a harlot of Jericho, a woman named Rahab, will inform the Israelite spies that her people had been terrified by the news that Israel was entering the land, led by their almighty God. But look at the people of Israel here; they’re comparing themselves to the giants in the land, rather than comparing the giants to their unfailing, all-powerful creator God.

It becomes clear here in chapter 14 and verse 1 that the people ignore Caleb and Joshua and listen to the majority report. In fact, the congregation begins to weep, and they cry all night long. As far as they’re

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concerned, there are nothing *but* obstacles in the land, and all of them are bigger than God!

So we read in verses 2-4:

All the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron. 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! Why is the LORD bringing us into this land, to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become a prey. Would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?” And they said to one another, “Let us choose a leader and go back to Egypt.”

Joshua and Caleb tear their clothes in anguish over the people’s rebellion and deliver this incredible declaration of faith in verse 9: “Do not rebel against the LORD . . . do not fear the people of the land . . . the LORD is with us.”



But the people are unmoved. In fact, verse 10 tells us they want to stone Joshua and Caleb to death. But their plans to murder these two men and choose a new leader instead of Moses are suddenly interrupted by a spectacular appearance of “the glory of the LORD.”

Then in verse 12, the Lord says to Moses, “I will strike them with the pestilence and disinherit them, and I will make of you a nation greater and mightier than they.” In other words, He’s saying, “Let’s start over.”

Now, understand that while this offer is a genuine expression of God’s anger, it’s also a test for Moses; and Moses passes the test by interceding for his rebellious flock. This is a good example for every parent and every leader who’s tempted to throw in the towel and quit.

Moses stays the course. In fact, he argues that if God destroys Israel, it will give cause for the Egyptians and the Canaanites to mock God as unable to fulfill His promises.

This is exactly what the Lord wanted to hear from His servant Moses—a greater passion for the glory of God than for the ministry God had given him. And that’s a warning to us today: it’s possible for us to care more about the ministry and the reputation of the minister than we do about the reputation of our Master and Lord.

So, God withdraws His threat of annihilation, but He announces some very serious consequences for the people because of their rebellion against God and refusal to enter the promised land.

First, all the men twenty years and older are responsible for this decision. Therefore, they will die in the wilderness and never see the promised land. Caleb and Joshua are the only exceptions.

Second, all the children will have to wait forty years before they have the opportunity to enter the promised land.

Third, as we read here in verse 37, the ten spies who championed the obstacles and led the people into

disobeying the Lord died immediately by a disease sent from the Lord.

And finally, when some of the people realized the mistake they had made and tried to enter the promised land, the Lord did not go with them. Consequently, they suffered defeat in battle.

One author points out the lesson here for us all, noting that faith is obeying God in spite of how we feel or what we see, even if all we can see are obstacles—obstacles the size of giants! The Lord delights in doing wonders for those who trust Him. ²

This is the same lesson taught by that old hymn of the faith, written in 1887:

*Trust and obey,
For there’s no other way,
To be happy in Jesus,
But to trust and obey.* ³

What promises of God are most precious to you? Why is it important to keep a full supply God’s promises ready on your heart to claim? Why does Satan work so steadily to distract you from God’s promises and His fulfillment of them?

What resources has God already provided you to help assure that your response to obstacles in life are like Joshua and Caleb’s rather than the other ten spies? What heart attitudes help us see life’s obstacles as divinely provided opportunities?

¹ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Counted* (Chariot Victor Publishing, 1999), 55.

² Wiersbe, 62-63.

³ John H. Sammis, “Trust and Obey.”

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