

Scouting the Land

March 10, 2024

Lesson Summary

Main Passages

Numbers 13:17-33

Session Outline

1. Sending the Spies (Numbers 13:17-25)
2. Scouting Report (Numbers 13:26-29)
3. Faith vs. Fear (Numbers 13:30-33)

Theological Theme

God calls us to step out in faith and obedience, no matter our circumstances, because we trust Him.

Call to Action

God promised the land of Canaan to his People. Some believed, some doubted. What is God calling you to do but fear is standing in your way?



Leader Guide

Scouting the Land

Introduction

There is a great scene in the classic movie *Hoosiers* when the small-town high school underdogs make it to the state basketball finals. The team of country boys had never been to a gymnasium quite like the one where the finals were being held and were completely overwhelmed by the magnitude.

Coach Dale, played by Gene Hackman, didn't want his team to give up before they even started so he brought out a measuring tape and had the players help him measure the height of the goal and the various distances on the court. His point was to give them perspective. Instead of being overwhelmed by the size of the gym and feeling too small to compete, he helped them see that the court was the exact same size they were used to playing, and winning, on.¹ Seeing things from a proper perspective is a big deal.

- ❓ When have you been overwhelmed by your circumstances?
- ❓ What helps you gain the proper perspective when your circumstances threaten to overwhelm you?


Session Summary

The children of Israel found themselves on the border of the promised land and fighting a battle between faith and fear. After sending twelve spies to scout out the land, they had to choose whether to place their faith in God or give in to the fear that they would not be able to conquer the people occupying the land God had promised.

Ten of the spies reported back that God had been right about how great Canaan was but then proceeded to share cautions based on human perspective. When we base our decisions on what circumstances look like from our perspective and fail to take the power of God into account, we set ourselves up to miss out on what He wants to do in and through us. Caleb called the Israelites to immediate and complete obedience despite the reports of the other spies. We should follow his example and step into what God has for us.

1. Sending the Spies (Numbers 13:17-25)

After their exodus from Egypt complete with troops racing after them and parting the Red Sea to walk on dry ground, the Israelites made it to the edge of the promised land, Canaan. The goal they had been pushing for and looking forward to for so long was now in sight just across the Jordan River. Moses gathered the people and chose one man from each tribe to go and spy out the land.

 What benefit would there be in sending one representative from each tribe to scout the land?


The twelve spies received instructions to go into the land and see what it was like. Although the Lord had told them that the land was good, the spies were sent out to investigate and bring back a first-hand report to the nation.

Note that Moses told them the direction to go and what information to bring back. He wanted to know about the state of the land itself—if it was good for producing crops. They were to find out what kind of people occupied the land and how they lived. All these instructions were meant to prepare the Israelites for moving into and taking the land God had given to them.

The spies set out and followed Moses's instructions. Touring the land, they went through the various cities and evaluated all they saw. During the forty days of their mission, the men learned much about Canaan and the people who lived there. At one point they even cut some of the produce they found. One cluster of grapes took two men to carry, displaying the bountiful nature of the land.

 How were God's promises verified through the scouting of the land?

Much like the Israelites, we are faced with a choice of how to prepare and follow through in obedience to God. These spies did as Moses asked, and it took forty days. In Scripture, forty days often represents a time of testing or preparation. There are similar times in our lives where we find ourselves on the edge of God's plan for us—a place He promised us, a new land He wants us to step into, or a position He invites us to trust Him in. What we do with that time will determine how the next steps go.


 Application: How might God be preparing you for the next season right now?

The Height of Rebellion

Following three successive seditious actions by the people of Israel, each resulting in dramatic judgment from God, the first rebellion cycle reaches its climax in the people's rejection of the land God had promised since he called them into being through an oath to Abraham.


2. Scouting Report (Numbers 13:26-29)

The spies returned from their mission ready to report all they had seen and experienced in the land. They began by referencing being sent by Moses and the people instead of being sent by God. This may be an indication of their human perspective as opposed to seeing things from God's perspective. This would become even more obvious as the men shared their recommendation.

 Why does it matter that the spies were viewing things from a human perspective? Why does this matter in our lives?


Consider some of the specific things the men shared about the land. They acknowledged it was a beautiful and fruitful land just as God had described. After God's repeated and miraculous faithfulness, there should have been no surprise that what He promised was true. The same is true in our lives. God has given us a deep well of His faithfulness to draw from in moments of uncertainty, but we easily turn back to what our eyes can see and what we believe is possible according to human standards.

Verse 28 begins with the word "however." Some versions translate this as "nevertheless." Either way, though the spies had seen God's promises confirmed, they were led to believe something else.

 Where are you prone to add "however" to the promises of God? Why is this problematic?

Most of the spies essentially said, "Despite what God told us about the land, here's what we saw and what we think instead." They listed out several factors that caused concern. They pointed out that the people of the land were strong and intimidating, and this was not unfounded: these were people with a history as tyrants and bullies.

The cities were also described as fortified and strong. The spies' report was intended to create doubt and fear in the hearts and minds of the rest of the nation. Instead of encouraging the people to go into the land to take what God had already promised, the spies led the people toward rebellion and disobedience.

 Application: What circumstance have you been looking at from a human perspective instead of viewing it through your faith in God?

3. Faith vs. Fear (Numbers 13:30-33)

But not all the spies acted out of fear. Two of them were full of faith. Caleb stepped up and spoke out. He was not the oldest or most powerful man in the group, but he still made a stand for what was right. He commanded the people to trust and obey God by taking the land as God had promised. Caleb called for immediate obedience by stepping out in faith and trusting that God would take care of the rest. It is important to realize the fears of the other spies were legitimate, but God's promise and call for the people surpassed these threats. Caleb displayed characteristics of a great spiritual leader, doing what was right, even in a crowd full of doubt, fear, and unbelief. He was more focused on trusting God than joining the crowd.

Caleb's stand stirred up the other spies, who continued to argue why it was impossible to go into the land. The basis of their response was a combination of truth, lies, and exaggerations fueled by fear. The enemy often uses these tactics to prevent God's people from moving forward in faith and obedience. When the enemy can stir up the imagination of God's people to focus on all the terrible things that might possibly happen, he can paralyze them and keep them stuck in the wrong place. This is what happened with the Israelites right on the edge of the promised land.



When was a time you were tempted to believe lies about God instead of God's promises? How did you respond?

The persuasive power of the other spies' report was found in the bits of truth they shared. The strong warriors were there. But asserting that they could not go up against those people was false. They had forgotten God is in the business of fighting on behalf of His people. They were never instructed to take the land in their own strength but to trust and obey the Lord as they continued to step out in faith. Sadly, fear overcame them, and faith was left on the banks of the Jordan River.



Where are you being ruled by fear currently? How might God want to change your perspective?

The intersection of faith and fear is a place we often find ourselves. Will we believe only what we see or trust in the Lord? The Israelite spies looked at the promised land from human perspective instead of God's perspective. They compared themselves to the powerful people living in the land and felt like grasshoppers. Any time we compare ourselves to our circumstances, we have potential to feel inadequate and ill-prepared. But when we compare our circumstances to our God, He is always bigger, stronger, and more powerful. Right perspective is the key.



Application: Where is God calling you to trust Him over what you see? How will you respond?

Conclusion

The children of Israel reached the edge of the promised land, but the journey was not over. They found themselves at a defining moment where they must choose whether to continue trusting the Lord or give into fear of their circumstances. Sending the spies into the land was supposed to give them the information they needed to take the land.

At the Lord's command, Moses sent one man from each of the twelve tribes of Israel to scout out the land of Canaan, bringing back a report on what the land was like, and bringing back some of the fruit of the land (Num. 13:1-3,17-20). Their assignment was not to decide whether Israel should possess the land. God had already decided that (v. 2). Like the Israelites who doubted God's provision in the wilderness, ten of the twelve scouts let their circumstances dictate their joy. They reacted based on what they would be able to accomplish in their own strength. The same people who saw the Lord part the Red Sea while they walked on dry ground were now worried that they may not be able to fight against the strong inhabitants of Canaan.

When the spies took their eyes off the Lord and focused on their difficult circumstances, it influenced the desire of the entire nation. Any time we give in to the temptation to face our circumstances in our own strength, we will feel ill-equipped and inadequate. But if we compare our circumstances to God, He is always big enough and strong enough for anything we face.

Unlike the ten spies, Caleb and Joshua's focus was not on their own strength or on the strength of their adversaries. Their focus was on the strength of the Lord. They were able to obey the Lord in the face of tremendous opposition because their hearts were not focused on themselves but on their great, mighty, and gracious Father. Joshua and Caleb begged the people not to rebel or to be afraid. They were so dismayed over the whole situation that they tore their clothes as an act of mourning or sorrow. In their obedience, Joshua and Caleb point forward to Jesus, who would show perfect obedience in the face of extreme opposition. At every point of possible failure, Jesus obeyed the Father completely.

- ❓ What is God calling you to do where fear stands in the way of obedience?
- ❓ Where do you need to speak up for what is right like Caleb did?
- ❓ Who is God calling you to have a gospel conversation with? How can today's study encourage you in that?

Prayer of Response

Thank the Lord for keeping His promises and being completely trustworthy. Ask for wisdom to see where fear has been holding you back from obeying Him.

Memory Verse

Then Caleb quieted the people in the presence of Moses and said, "Let's go up now and take possession of the land because we can certainly conquer it!" - Numbers 13:30

Additional Resources

- *Leviticus and Numbers by Roy Gane*
- *Leviticus and Numbers by W.H. Bellinger*
- *Numbers by J. Vernon McGee*

Disciples Multiplying Disciples



Historical Context of Numbers

Purpose

Numbers shows us how God responded to the unbelief of the Israelites. There are consequences to our disobedience, but God's grace remains and his redemptive plan and desire for us will not be stopped. The book of Numbers underscores for us the importance of obedience in the life of a Christian, and Paul reminded us of the value of learning from the way God has worked in the past (Rm 15:4; 1Co 10:6, 11).

Author

Christian scholars have traditionally held that Moses was the author of the Pentateuch, which includes the book of Numbers. As with the other books in the Pentateuch, Numbers is anonymous, but Moses is a central character throughout. Moses kept a journal (33:2), and the phrase "The Lord spoke to Moses" is used over 40 times. It is possible that a few portions were later added by scribes, such as the reference to Moses's humility (12:3) and the reference to the "Book of the Lord's Wars" (21:14). Moses remains the primary writer.

Setting

Numbers continues the historical narrative begun in Exodus. It picks up one month after the close of Exodus (Ex 40:2; Nm 1:1), which is about one year after the Israelites' departure from Egypt. Numbers covers the remaining thirty-nine years of the Israelites' stay in the wilderness, from Sinai to Kadesh, and finally to the plains on the eastern side of the Jordan River.

Special Features

The English title "Numbers" derives from the Septuagint name "Arithmoi," based on the two military censuses in chapters 1 and 26. The Hebrew title, Bemidbar, "In the Wilderness," describes the geographical setting of much of the book—from the Wilderness of Sinai to the arid Plains of Moab, across the Jordan River from Jericho.

Extended Commentary

Numbers 13:17-33

13:17 The Negev in the OT refers to the region south of Hebron, but north of the Zin Wilderness. In modern Israel “Negev” refers to the region from the Beer-sheba-Arad line southward to Eilat on the Gulf of Aqaba.

13:21 The scouts explored the land from the Wilderness of Zin as far as Rehob near the entrance to Hamath. Parallel to the later description of the land as extending from Dan (in the north) to Beer-sheba (in the south), these parameters reverse the order and extend the distance from south of Beer-sheba to Rehob of Lebo-Hamath in southeastern Lebanon, somewhat north of Tel Dan. Lebo is recounted as a city on the northern border of the promised land (34:7–8) and later of the Israelite kingdom of David and Solomon (1Kg 8:65).

13:22 Hebron is said to have been fortified seven years before Zoan, which was in the eastern Nile Delta, about a hundred miles northeast of Cairo. The Egyptian name for Zoan is Dja’net, which was pronounced by the Greeks as Tanis. It is associated with the site known as Tel el-Daba. The names of the three clans descended from Anak indicate they were Semitic. They were also known as being “strong and tall” (Dt 9:2 and see note on Nm 13:33).

13:23–24 The Hebrew word *’eshcol* means “a cluster of grapes,” and hence Valley of Eshcol reflects the productivity of the vineyards in the valley, which is located west of Hebron. Ripe pomegranates and figs suggest a date of late August or early September for this exploration of Canaan.

13:25 The scouts’ forty days of exploring the land matches the approximate time it would have taken for the 350- to 400-mile journey on foot, based upon the twelve to fifteen miles per day average recounted in the annals of the Egyptian military campaigns of Thutmose III (1504–1450 BC) and Ramesses II (1290–1225 BC).

13:26 The Israelite scouts had departed from the Paran Desert area and had worked their way north into the Negev and through what would later be Judah and Israel. The Israelites meanwhile continued their journey to the oasis of Kadesh-barnea, presumed to be the area of Quseima, at the headwaters of the wilderness basin of the Nahal Zin.

13:27 The report of the scouts began on the positive side with the demonstration of the fruitfulness of the promised land. Milk and honey became the classic description of the abundance of natural flora and fauna of the land of Canaan (Ex 3:8, 17; 13:5; 33:3; Lv 20:24; Dt 6:3; 11:9). This assessment is echoed in the Egyptian travel account “The Story of Sinuhe” in which the princely emissary described the land of Yaa and its abundant produce.

13:28–29 The tenor of the report quickly changed to a negative assessment of the possibility of conquering the heavily fortified cities and the numerous inhabitants, which they claimed included giants. The problem was that the people focused on their own strength rather than the power of God. The point of the later victories over the Midianites, Amorites, and Canaanites was to demonstrate God’s strength. The power of Israel was never in her armies. Victory came at the hands of the Lord of Armies. Recent discoveries that confirm the biblical data suggest a complex composite of ethnic groups living in the land of Canaan during the Late Bronze (1550–1200 BC) and Iron I (1200–1000 BC) ages.

The Amalekites were a semi-nomadic tribe from the region of Edom that ranged throughout the southern Levant, from northern Sinai to the hill country of Samaria. Hormah (Tel Masos in the Negev) may have been one of their cities (14:45).

The Hethites, known from the patriarchal period (Gn 23:3–20), were from the central highlands; they originated in eastern Anatolia around the third millennium BC. They are different from the Hittites, whose empire flourished in the late Bronze Age (1550–1200 BC). Centered in Hattusa, it extended from central Anatolia to the upper Euphrates River and to the northern Levant.

The Jebusites were a non-Semitic clan who lived in Jerusalem during the middle Bronze through Iron I periods (2000–1000 BC); they remained in control of the city until the time of the Davidic conquests (2Sm 5:6–9). They are unknown outside the Bible, though the city of Jerusalem is mentioned in the cuneiform documents from Tel Amarna from the late Bronze Age (1550–1200 BC). Scholars have suggested they may have been a subclan of the Perizzites or related to the Hurrians. The Table of Nations lists the Jebusites as descendants of Canaan (Gn 10:16).

The Semitic Amorites lived in the hill country of the central and southern Levant. The term Amorite can refer to a number of inhabitants of areas known today as Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, and Palestine. It may also refer more specifically to ethnic descendants of Canaan as delineated in Gn 10:16. They were referred to as the Amurru (“Amorites” or “westerners”) in Akkadian records at Mari and the Martu in Sumerian texts of the third and second millennia BC. Egyptian records describe their territory as extending from the Negev to the heights of Lebanon. The Canaanites emerged in the middle Bronze Age (2000–1550 BC) in the southern Levant (Gn 12:6) and continued to be a significant percentage of the population into the late Bronze Age (1550–1200 BC) and Iron I Age (1200–1000 BC). The land of Canaan was controlled by Egypt under the Eighteenth (Empire Kingdom, 1570–1400 BC) and Nineteenth (Ramesside, 1302–1175 BC) dynasties. The region extended along the Mediterranean Sea from the Wadi el-Arish to Lebo-hamath in Lebanon, and inland to the Jordan Valley region. The designation of “Canaan” may derive from the Akkadian word meaning “red purple,” based on the production of red-to-purple dyes produced from the abundant murex shells along the Lebanese coast. Other scholars point to the Semitic root k-n-ʿ meaning “to bend, be subdued.” The earliest reference to “Canaan” comes from the eighteenth century BC in Mari.

13:30 Caleb was the first to counter the objections of the majority of the scouts. The name “Caleb” means “dog,” and it serves as an example of the danger of reading too much into the meaning of biblical names.

13:31–32 The negative report was circulated by word of mouth. The grumbling grew into greater discontent as the scouts exaggerated the stature and strength of their enemies.

13:33 The reference to the descendants of Anak as Nephilim was designed to instill fear in the hearts of the Israelites. The Nephilim, “fallen ones” (“giants” in the LXX), are noted in Gn 6:4 as the offspring of the “sons of God” (“angelic beings” or “divine warriors”) and the “daughters of men.” The Nephilim were of large stature, but they all would have been destroyed in Noah’s flood (Gn 6:11), so it is best to conclude that the frightened spies gave an exaggerated report. Grasshoppers were the smallest of edible creatures permitted for Israelite consumption (Lv 11:22).²

References

1. *Hoosiers*, directed by David Anspaugh, performances by Gene Hackman, Barbara Hershey, and Dennis Hooper (1986; Los Angeles, CA: Orion Pictures, 2000), DVD.
2. R. Dennis Cole, “Numbers,” in *CSB Study Bible: Notes*, ed. Edwin A. Blum and Trevin Wax (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017), 224–225.