

Lesson 6: THE SPIES REPORT

READING: Numbers 13 and 14; Hebrews 3:8-19

AIM: To consider Israel's unsuccessful bid to enter the Promised Land because of their unbelief.

1. BACKGROUND

Israel remained at Mt. Sinai for about 12 months, bringing the time to about 14 months after leaving Egypt. When they departed, the standards of the tribes were raised and the cloud of glory, the symbol of God's presence, was at their head (Num. 10:12). Always the day's march began and ended with a prayer (Num. 10:35-36).

The nation marched in four divisions under the leadership of Judah, Reuben, Ephraim and Dan (Num. 10:14, 18, 22, 25). In the centre of the marching tribes came the Tabernacle. Being a prefabricated type of building, it could be quickly and easily taken down or erected during the journeying of the Children of Israel. All the holy furniture was first covered (by Aaron and his sons), with covers of coloured linen and a protective overlay of badger skin. The Kohathites of the tribe of Levi carried the furniture on their shoulders by the staves provided for that purpose. All other parts of the Tabernacle were loaded on to six wagons, each drawn by two bullocks (Num. 4:15; 7:1-9).

2. FROM SINAI TO KADESH. Num. 11 and 12.

After leaving Sinai, Israel journeyed northward through the wilderness of Paran and encamped at Kadesh-barnea. (Deut. 1: 19) Refer to a map. This was a place directly south of Canaan, close to the borders of that land, and it appeared to be a suitable site from which to invade Canaan.

The march from Sinai to Kadesh-barnea through a terrible wilderness brought discontent and grumbling from the people. Although only a few days from the borders of the Promised Land they could not endure the discomforts of the wilderness for even a short time, but longed again for the "flesh-pots" of Egypt (Num. 11:4-6). Discouragement spread, so that even the leaders of the nation were affected. Arguments broke out and finally Miriam and Aaron challenged the authority of Moses (Num. 12:1). God intervened and punished Miriam. The journey was delayed as a result. Eventually, however, they came to Paran (Num. 12:16) and to Kadesh, meaning "Sanctuary". It was a beautiful oasis in the harsh, unfriendly wilderness.

3. THE SPIES. Num. 13: 1-28

Arriving at the borders of Canaan, the people suggested to Moses that spies should be sent to view the land and its inhabitants (Deut. 1: 22). As in all matters of importance Moses consulted God, who commanded that a ruler from each tribe of Israel should be chosen to inspect the land.

Of the 12 appointed, only Caleb of the tribe of Judah, and Oshea, renamed Jehoshua or Joshua, of the tribe of Ephraim proved their worth as faithful spies, who showed courage, fortitude and a godly spirit (Num. 14:24).

Moses commanded the 12 men to report about:

- The attractiveness of Canaan.
- The defenses of the land.
- The nature and character of the inhabitants.

The search took 40 days during which they scouted Canaan. They were pleased with the produce of the land and gathered pomegranates, figs and grapes. They brought back a large bunch of grapes carried on a staff by two men. This was to show the Israelites that Canaan was fertile and could produce good food.

The spies found that the cities of Canaan were walled and strongly defended. Recent excavations prove that walls 28 ft. thick surrounded some of those old cities. The spies visited Hebron, a city famed for its antiquity. Its inhabitants, they said were sons of Anak (called Anakim), a race of people so tall that the Israelites felt as small "as grasshoppers" before them.

4. ISRAEL'S UNBELIEF. Num. 13: 30-33, 14:1-10

When the spies reported about the strong cities and great men they had seen in Canaan, Israel grew faint-hearted and afraid. Caleb, supported by Joshua (Num. 14:6-9), tried to calm them. With confidence and faith he urged them to go up at once, fight bravely with trust in God, and possess the land.

Israel registered its unbelief in the Lord's protection and power by preferring to believe the 10 men who were weak and faithless compared with Caleb. How natural to accept the exaggerated report based on human reasoning which leaves God out, rather than the good and true! We know by experience that often it is easier to believe evil than good and to leave God out of our considerations.

Israel "lifted up their voice and cried". They rebelled not only against Moses and Aaron but against God for bringing them "unto this land". They ignored the great miracles so recently worked for them; they trusted only in their own strength. They suggested appointing a captain and returning to Egypt.

Moses and Aaron were grief-stricken and lay on the ground before Israel. Joshua and Caleb pleaded with the people and assured them that, if they were willing, God would bring them into this good land, "a land which floweth with milk and honey". The time was ready for the idolatrous Canaanites to be destroyed. Israel had no reason to be afraid when God was with them. Despite these assurances, Israel rebelled and were about to stone Caleb and Joshua when God's glory appeared before them in the Tabernacle.

5. MOSES' INTERCESSION. Num. 14: 11-21

God threatened to destroy Israel and make of Moses a greater nation. Moses pleaded for Israel as he had at Sinai when they worshipped the golden calf. Moses asked God that Israel might be saved and brought to Canaan, so that God's name might be held in honour by the Egyptians. He asked God to forgive His people as he had so many times since leaving Egypt. God heeded Moses' intercession and said, "I have pardoned according to thy word".

6. ISRAEL'S PUNISHMENT. Num. 14: 22-45

God's purpose is not frustrated by unbelief (Rom. 3:3-4, II : 20. 32). Though God forgave Israel and did not destroy them, He punished them severely. "Behold therefore the goodness and severity of God" (Rom. 11:22-23).

- They were not to enter the Promised Land.
- They were to return to the wilderness and die there.
- They were to wander for 40 years until all the adults who had disbelieved were dead (a year for each day the spies searched the land).
- Their children, those under 20 years at the time of the rebellion, were to inherit the Land of Promise.

Israel mourned when Moses told them of their punishment. Some arose early and tried to force their way into the land though Moses warned them and told them God would not be with them. Consequently God allowed them to be defeated and smitten by the Amalekites and Canaanites.

Only those two righteous men of that generation, Caleb and Joshua, who "wholly followed the Lord", were permitted to enter the land (Heb. 4:5-11). This they did after 40 years in the wilderness (Deut.1: 36-38). The ten faithless spies were stricken with plague and died.

7. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The Israelites preferred to walk by sight, as do the majority of people today. Faith has the power to see beyond present difficulties, but the world does not put much confidence in faith. Nevertheless, with God, faith is all-important for without faith it is impossible to please Him. And faith comes by hearing the Word of God (Rom. 10:17).

Sometimes we may be faced with difficulties quite beyond our capacity to solve. This is good for us as it teaches us to wait on God and look to Him. If we do this, our problems will be resolved (perhaps not in the way we would wish). At the very least, we will be brought to see things in a different way so that even a major problem will be seen to be of little consequence in relation to eternal and spiritual things. May we echo the words of Mark 9:24, "Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief".

REFERENCE LIBRARY

"The Visible Hand of God," chapter 17.

"Where It Happened," chapter 6.

"Moses, My Servant," chapter 6.

"The Letter to the Hebrews," section 3.

QUESTIONS

1. What was the cause of Israel's failure after they left Sinai?
2. How can we show faith similar to that of Joshua and Caleb on our journey towards God's Kingdom?
3. Write an account of the spies and show how their report affected Israel.