

Unbelief

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[0 : 00] Lord, I ask that as we look at this passage that you would give us courage. Give me courage, Lord, for it's with some trepidation that we look at this theme of unbelief, Lord, knowing that there are many among us who have experienced a kind of pain that I have yet to experience, Lord, a pain that might cause doubt or unbelief, of questioning you.

And so, Lord, would you encourage us all through your word? Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O Lord.

Would you, Lord, please forgive the sin of the one delivering this message? And Lord Jesus, we would see you most of all. We pray in Jesus' name, amen.

We're continuing this morning our study of Psalm 119. It's what can be called an historical psalm. The psalm writer is one of the many Israelites in exile in Babylon after Judah, the southern kingdom, had been conquered by Babylon and its inhabitants sent off into exile to the kingdom of Babylon.

The psalm recounts many of Israel's failures for two reasons. The psalmist wants to warn the exiles against the failures of their ancestors and more importantly, to tell of God's faithfulness and patience despite his people's failures.

[1 : 38] Now, so far we've heard through studying Psalm 106 about the Israelites grumbling, about their jealousy, and about their idolatry. And this morning we're going to learn about her unbelief.

Unbelief is a very relevant topic for us. I think most of us have heard some kind of polling about the number of evangelicals leaving the evangelical church.

Not that we need the polling. I think all of us here know somebody or are close to a person who has left the faith that we once shared together.

You've seen it happen in the life of a sibling, and a spouse, a roommate, a close friend, or one of your children.

And for some of you, it's happening in your life right now. You're experiencing unbelief to some degree.

[2 : 40] And I would suggest that all of us, all of us are to some degree in danger of unbelief, or else there wouldn't be such stark warnings against unbelief in all of Scripture.

We're going to look at what Numbers 14 and Psalm 106 have to say about unbelief. We're going to learn about God's character.

So, what is unbelief? Who is God? But first I'd like to descend into the setting of Numbers 14. This is a very pivotal story in the whole drama of Scripture.

So, let's descend into the desert of Kadesh in Paran. You're standing with all the other Israelites in the middle of this settlement.

Kadesh lies at the very edge of the promised land, the land that was promised to you, your countrymen. And this same border would exist 3,500 years later between Egypt and Israel.

[3 : 57] It's been roughly a year and a half since you and the Israelites were rescued by God from Egypt passing through the Red Sea. And it's been 40 days since the 12 spies had been sent out to spy out the promised land.

And they've just returned. And they're holding a single cluster of grapes. But the cluster is so big that they need to suspend it from a pole carried by two spies.

And from their sacks, the spies also pull out pomegranates and figs. You can hear the reports that the spies are giving to Moses.

They say it's a land flowing with milk and honey. In other words, it's not an agricultural wonderland like the Nile River Basin, but it's perfect land for cattle and for goats and for growing sweet things like dates and grapes.

This marks a strong contrast to the barrenness and desolation of the desert that you find yourself in right now. It's hot, it's dusty, and dry.

[5 : 09] There's one big problem though that the spies report. Unless there's people there, they're not going to want to give up their land so easily.

The spies report that they live in fortified cities, some with walls that are 24 feet thick. And the people themselves are huge.

The spies believe them to be what are called Nephilim. These were mythic giants right from the pages of your holy and sacred history. And the spies say that the land devours everyone in it. That means that the tribes there are accustomed to war. So they have both the experience and the gear to defend themselves. And you look around, you look at yourself, you look at all the Israelites around you and you think, man, we are really short.

We're super skinny. What's going to happen? It makes sense why the spies said that they felt like grasshoppers in comparison to them. So here's what's facing you. You're on the very doorstep of the vast land promised to you and your countrymen and you and everyone around you are convinced it's a death trap.

[6 : 22] When you step foot in this land, those of you who can hold a sword are going to get hacked to pieces by giants. And those who don't hold swords are going to be taken as plunder.

You know, life was pretty hard in Egypt but at least your family could stick together. No one was smashing your skull in with a giant hammer.

Of course, you seem to have pushed out of your memory a whole generation of baby boys being murdered by the Egyptians. But you're going to ignore that inconvenient truth at the moment.

Anything to justify turning around. Of course, you know, it's Moses and Aaron that got us into this mess so let's get rid of them and let's choose another leader who will do what we want.

And everyone around you is thinking the same thing. And people start to get really freaked out and angry and you feel like something's about to happen. People's murmuring has led to loud talking, has led to shouting, there's people sobbing.

[7 : 31] And you're feeling something too like you are feeling so desperate that with the right provocation you would do something violent to save your life and the lives of your family members.

All you can think about, all that's fixated in your mind's eye is a giant. An angry, bloodthirsty man with a bloody sword bringing it down on your head.

and you join the chorus. These are the words you hear coming from your mouth. You scream, if only we had died in Egypt or in this wilderness.

Why is the Lord bringing us to this land only to let us fall by the sword? Our wives and children will be taken as plunder. Wouldn't it be better for us to go back to Egypt?

Something curious happens during this frenzy which gets everyone's attention. Moses and Aaron who have led you into this death trap, they lie down on their stomachs, faces to the ground and you're not sure why.

[8 : 39] You assume it's because they're feeling really angry or maybe they're expecting the Lord to show up which would not be good. And then Caleb and Joshua, they tear their clothes.

Okay, that has your attention. so it gets quiet. So quiet you can hear a pin drop on the dusty rocks of this desert that you're standing on. And Joshua and Caleb say, the land we passed through and explored is exceedingly good.

If the Lord is pleased with us, He will lead us into that land, a land flowing with milk and honey. and He'll give it to us. Only do not rebel against the Lord and do not be afraid of the people of the land because we will devour them.

Their protection is gone. But the Lord is with us. Do not be afraid of them. Well, you don't buy it.

And you've heard enough. The dam has burst. People are losing their minds and now they're picking up stones. It seems to you and to those around you that Caleb and Joshua are breaking one of the Ten Commandments.

[9 : 54] Ten spies, good men, all share the same eyewitness account. Ten. Ten witnesses. Caleb and Joshua are bearing false witness against them. That's clear to you.

In such a way as to lead you all to your, as to lead us, excuse me, as to lead you all to your deaths. So you think, let's bring about the Lord's judgment on them.

Let's pick up these stones and stone them. Let's pause the narrative. Let's pause the narrative and consider a few things. First, let's consider Caleb's response.

It's interesting to me that he does not agree. Excuse me, he doesn't disagree. He does not disagree, which means he agrees. He does not disagree with the Ten Spies as to the giants, okay? Yes, Caleb is saying, we agree. They are very big people. And yes, the cities are big and fortified. We have found some remains, actually, 3,500 years later.

[10 : 54] 24 feet thick these walls are. Caleb doesn't deny any of that. To deny it would be like gaslighting, right? Well, you know, if he were to deny it, it would be like saying this, you know, what you saw, you didn't actually see.

You must have had some kind of anxiety or heat stroke, which is making you exaggerate in your mind what really isn't that big of a deal. It's important to note this because, like, we face giants, too. We face giants, too. And perhaps someone has tried to convince you otherwise, that the giant you're facing isn't really a giant. And if you're like me, more than likely, you're good at gaslighting yourself, all on your own.

And you've questioned your own sanity and your own perception. And I think what Caleb is saying is, yes, the giants are real. pain, trauma, injustice, death, sickness, abuse, abandonment, suffering, doubts.

Whatever it is that looms largest in your view, the act of trusting in God doesn't call for you to deny the reality of those giants.

[12 : 29] It's a matter of attention. The giants are big, but the Lord is bigger. The giants are big, but the Lord is bigger.

People took up a lot of interesting things during COVID. One of my sons and I we took up adventure racing. We watched Eco Challenge on Netflix.

And we thought, oh, let's do something like that. So we started training for one of these races which involved running, orienteering, paddling, and mountain biking.

And in learning mountain biking, I have had to painfully relearn what I learned when I was 15. And that was when I learned how to drive a car. The lesson is this.

Whatever you focus on, that's where you go. Whatever you focus on, that's where you go. So if I'm mountain biking, and if there's a tight turn to avoid a tree, I better focus on the path where I'm supposed to go.

[13 : 38] Okay? But it's human nature when one sees a giant tree coming at you very fast, like an full of wrath. To keep looking at it, that's what we're born to do.

Like, that's how we stay out of danger is to look at the thing that's causing us danger. But when you're mountain biking, or when you're driving, when you're mountain biking and you look at the danger, you're going to collide with the tree.

So you have to train your eyes and you have to train your mind to be continually looking at where you want to go. Or else you collide with the tree, which I perhaps have painfully learned, you go exactly where your attention is focused.

You go exactly where your attention is focused. Caleb gets that. Okay? Hear what Caleb says. The land we promised, excuse me, the land we passed through and explored is exceedingly good.

Okay? He's focused on the Lord's promise. God's promises reflect his character, who he is. He's good, merciful, wise, just.

[14 : 44] And Caleb says, if the Lord is pleased with us, he will lead us into that land. The Lord is with us. Again, Caleb is focused on the Lord and his love and his faithfulness to his people, whom he has pledged himself to.

Unbelief is born, I think this is what this is saying, unbelief is born when we have our attention fixed on something else. Unbelief has an object.

It's not like belief has an object and unbelief does not. I don't think. Each has their own object.

Unbelief has an object like crashing my mountain bike has an object.

It's the tree. Belief is nurtured when our attention is focused on God and his character, revealed in his promises and in his acts on behalf of his people.

people. So how is God revealed in Numbers chapter 14? Well, he's revealed as both just and merciful. The Lord descends and appears at the tent of meeting and he says to Moses, how long will this people despise me and how long will they not believe in me?

[15 : 57] In spite of all the signs that I've done among them, I will strike them with the pestilence and disinherit them and I will make you, Moses, a nation greater and mightier than they. Israel had turned their backs on God.

They wanted to return to Egypt. They wanted to reverse the exodus. They wanted to reverse the foundational event in their identity as a people.

It would be just then for God to turn his back on them. It would be perfectly just. He didn't owe them anything. But Moses appeals to God.

He prays to God and he appeals to two things. First, he appeals to God's honor and power. Lord, what would Egypt say? Well, Lord, Egypt would say you weren't able to do what you said you were going to do.

And then Moses appeals to something else. He appeals to God's mercy. Moses prayed, please pardon the iniquity of this people according to the greatness of your steadfast love.

[17:02] So the Lord relents, but not without consequences for Israel. The generation of adults that turned their backs on the promised land would not be able to cross over, but their children would.

The ten spies who gave the bad report would not be able to cross over, but the two spies who did, Joshua and Caleb, they would. Justice would have the Lord visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation we read elsewhere in Scripture, but God restricts his discipline just to this generation and is showing them mercy, showing mercy to his people to whom he has pledged himself.

There's another goal of the psalmist in writing Psalm 106. You remember the first one was don't make the mistakes that your ancestors made, so don't fall into unbelief.

Don't despise the Lord and his promises. The second thing the psalmist wants to do is in spite of everything, the Lord remains faithful to us. The Lord remains patient with us, constantly extending his mercy to us, even when we fail, even when we mess up, even when we divert our attention from him and everything he's done for us.

So the psalmist gives us the warning. How then can we avoid unbelief? Well, it's actually in some ways rather simple and yet it takes a lifetime of constant vigilance.

[18:39] We avoid unbelief through remembrance. We avoid unbelief through remembrance. We avoid unbelief through remembering.

Through paying attention to God, paying attention to his character, his deeds on behalf of his people, I'd like to offer you three ways. There's a lot of ways we can remember God and remember him and his works.

I'm going to offer you three ways. The first one has been really important to me. It's my family. It's what we call the daily examine. The daily examine. E-X-A-M-E-M.

At the core of the daily examine is reviewing the emotions we've had throughout the course of the day. We pray out of those. What we notice when we reflect on our day is that we experience both consolation and desolation.

Consolation, desolation. A person dwells in a state of consolation when he or she is moving towards God's active presence in the world. And we know we are moving in this way when we sense the growth of love or faith or hope in us.

[19:48] A person dwells in a state of desolation when she or he is moving away from God's active presence in the world. And we know we are moving in this way when we sense the growth of resentment and gratitude, selfishness, doubt, fear, and so on.

The way we practice this in my family is to talk about consolation and desolation as a paradox. I've told you this before.

It was seven years ago, you remember? So let me tell you again. A paradox, right? We can go through a day being pulled towards God and being pulled away from him, experiencing consolation and desolation.

It's a paradox, which sounds like a pair of ducks. So we as family talk about two ducks, the yay duck and the yuck duck. And the yay duck is this bright, gleaming, shiny duck.

Smells good, fluffy. And there's the yuck duck, smelly, dirty, gross, noisy, repellent. So yay ducks and yuck ducks.

[20:56] And so at the end of the day, we say, what are your yay ducks and your yuck ducks? We also did this a few weeks ago. I took two of my sons and five of their friends to a summer camp for a week.

And every night we would do yay ducks and yuck ducks. And there was a kid who was the most homesick I've ever seen anybody in my life. It was really sad.

I just cried for like three or four hours straight. But by the end of the first day, he was saying, this is the greatest camp in the world. So that was great. So at the end of the day, we said, what are your yuck ducks?

And he volunteered, like, well, I felt really homesick and I missed my family. So the point of talking about your yuck ducks is to pray out of that. Like, well, what happened because of your homesickness?

And he started to observe that all of his friends, his six other friends, it was beautiful, guys. All six of these boys rallied around this one boy, cheering him up. Doing things with him, it was awesome.

[22 : 02] And he also found courage, a courage that he had never really sought for, a kind that he never knew he had. So we were able to pray out of that, Lord, thank you for the courage you gave me in light of my really missing my family, thank you for my friends.

And so can you imagine doing this every day? So every day is full of consolations and desolations and praying out of your desolations and finding, oh God, you were present there. You were working there. You were working on my behalf.

You were loving me, showing me grace. So when we consider both our consolations and desolations, we discover and remember how God has been showing us goodness and faithfulness to us.

So the first is the daily examine. Yay ducks and yuck ducks. The second way is to surround yourself the second way is to remember Hebrews chapter 3.

Okay? So in Hebrews chapter 3, the writer of Hebrews is referencing Numbers 14 and warning his readers about unbelief.

[23 : 13] He writes, take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day as long as it is called today.

That none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. In other words, if you want to safeguard yourself against unbelief, surround yourself with a bunch of Caleb's, right?

Surround yourself with a bunch of people who are going to tell you, yes, the giants are big, but the Lord is with you. And the Lord has taken away its protection, and he's going to conquer these giants.

The Lord loves you. We do this by attending worship on Sundays. You can be a part of a core group. Sign-ups happen soon.

They meet in the fall and the spring. You can meet with believers who will pray for you and encourage you and point you to Jesus when your giants are taking up all your mind space. to a third way to remember the way Jesus told us to remember.

[24 : 20] Excuse me, the third way to remember is the way Jesus told us to remember, and that's to regularly sit at this table, eating this meal, with God's family, doing this in remembrance of me.

In Numbers chapter 14, we see both mercy and justice, but their intention, their intention, and it's unclear from Numbers 14 how that tension is resolved.

But at this table, we see it clearly. On the cross, Christ has absorbed all the consequences of our unbelief.

He dies outside the gates of the holy city, absorbing all that God's justice requires that we might enter into it and enjoy the fulfillment of all of God's promises, including, and especially, eternal life with him.

Eternal life with him after he has vanquished every giant. Pain, trauma, sickness, abuse, abandonment, suffering, and doubt.

[25 : 41] He will once and forever destroy. The giants are big. The Lord is bigger. So as we come to this table, let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.

For the joy set before him, he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen. Let's pray. Lord, we ask that as we remember you at this table, you would encourage us.

Lord, thank you for not just leaving us teachings, but you leave us yourself, you leave us your Holy Spirit, and you leave us this meal with which we're going to be fed.

So encourage us and strengthen us. Lord, we believe. Help our unbelief. In Jesus' name, Amen.