

Numbers 13-14

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[0:00] Good morning, everyone. I feel like, for Wan's benefit, I need to reiterate the message that Ian gave earlier, that our support is for the team led by Gareth Southgate.

! I just thought you might be interested. I thought you might be interested, Wan. I didn't want you to miss that important notice. If you're not into sport, it's a tough summer for you, isn't it? Because if football's not enough for you, then it's just a couple of weeks until the Olympics start. And it seems to be a sporting summer that just keeps on giving more and more. And even if you're not into sport particularly, there's something quite unique about the Olympics coming up in a couple of weeks.

Where nations come together and there's kind of personal stories of triumph and disaster that unfold. And you find yourself, if you're like me, getting emotionally invested in some kind of random kayak race or a Team GB dressage horse thing.

I just think, what am I doing? I'm wasting my time on this. There's something about it that's really, really compulsive. And I was thinking this week about some of the kind of iconic moments in Olympic history.

[1:20] And some of those aren't all about triumph. Often they're kind of about disaster as well. I don't know if you remember this chap. Keith, you're on it.

Derek Redmond, 1992, I think. That's probably why there's a few blank faces. He was halfway around the 400 metres race. And he pulled up with a leg injury.

And a medical help arrived, but he waved it away. And then his dad clambered down from the stands, got through security. And he kind of picked him up and helped him with his one good leg hop across the finish line.

And how about Paula Radcliffe? Remember her? She always looked in pain when she was running, didn't she? Her head was kind of bobbing up and down. She achieved so much in marathon running.

And she was desperate to win Olympic gold. But at the Athens Olympics in 2004, I think in a race she probably shouldn't have started. Because I think she was ill beforehand.

[2:22] She tried her best, but she pulled up and stopped with about three miles to go. And she was on the pavement crying. But what would be more unusual and surprising, I think, is if a fully fit athlete was nearing completing the race, but stopped short near the line and just said, you know what?

I'm done. It's not worth it. Why am I bothering? It would just be, it would be almost incomprehensible. I couldn't think of an example. Someone so near and just giving up.

But imagine your shock and sadness if someone you knew who had been a Christian for many years and was nearing the end of their life, just said, I'm done with this.

I wish I'd never become a Christian. What a waste of my life. It would be devastating, wouldn't it?

The events in today's passage that we're going to read in just a second are quite shocking.

They're so shocking, in fact, that their legacy runs through other parts of the Bible. And these events are referenced in Deuteronomy, in the Psalms, in 1 Corinthians, and in the book of Hebrews, where the writers look back with a real sense of painful disappointment.

[3:48] Painful disappointment because today's account is about a generation of people who get so close to the finishing line, but don't get over it. And this morning, I hope that we can see that there is so much in this passage to grasp about taking hold of the salvation that we've been given, walking through life in the presence of Christ, and making it home safely to our promised land.

We're going to look at the story in three sections and focus on fear, defiance, and faith. That's the closest I could get to three Fs.

So where are we up to in the book of Numbers? Well, it started well. The first few chapters are of ordered obedience. The tabernacle set up with the 12 tribes neatly arranged, and God's holy presence is at the center.

The laws are set out. God's presence is assured, and the cloud determines the movement of the people towards the promised land of Canaan.

The Lord has blessed them, been gracious to them. And he is in time going to give them peace and rest in the land of milk and honey.

[5 : 15] But most recently, there have been some signs of grumbling. We saw that last week, if you remember. There were complaints about the food God provided, and there were complaints also about Moses' leadership, from his own family, in fact.

But in these chapters, the grumbings become a full-blown rebellion. We're going to pick up the reading in chapter 13.

The Lord has asked Moses to send out some strong leaders, one from each tribe, to scout out the land of Canaan, the promised land, the destiny of his people.

So Amanda's going to come and read from Numbers chapter 13. Starting at verse 17.

When Moses sent them to explore Canaan, he said, Go up through Negev and on into the hill country. See what the land is like, and whether the people who live there are strong or weak, few or many.

[6 : 19] What kind of land do they live in? Good or bad? What kind of towns do they live in? Are they unwalled or fortified? How is the soil?

Is it fertile or poor? Are there trees in it or not? Do your best to bring back some of the fruit of the land. It was the season for the first ripe grapes.

So they went up and explored the land from the desert of Zin, as far as Rehob, towards Labo Hamath. They went up through the Negev and came to Hebron, where Heman, Sheshai, and Talmai, their descendants of Anak, lived.

Hebron had been built seven years before Zin in Egypt. When they reached the valley of Eshkol, they cut off a branch bearing a single cluster of grapes.

Two of them carried it on a pole between them, along with some pomegranates and figs. That place was called the valley of Eshkol because of the cluster of grapes the Israelites cut off there.

[7 : 21] At the end of 40 days, they returned from exploring the land. The report on the exploration. They came back to Moses and Aaron and the whole Israelite community at Kadesh in the desert of Paran.

There they reported to them and to the whole assembly and showed them the fruit of the land. They gave Moses this account. We went into the land to which you sent us, and it does flow with milk and honey.

Here is its fruit. But the people who live there are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large. We even saw descendants of Anak there.

The Amalekites live in the Negev. The Hittites, Jebusites, and Amorites live in the hill country. And the Canaanites live near the sea and along the Jordan.

Then Caleb silenced the people before Moses and said, We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can't certainly do it. We can certainly do it, even.

[8 : 30] Get that right? But the men who had gone up with him said, We can't attack those people. They are stronger than we are. And they spread among the Israelites a bad report about the land they had explored.

They said, The land we explored devours those living in it. All the people we saw there are of great size. We saw the Nephilim there, the descendants of Anak come from the Nephilim.

We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them. In chapter 14, the people rebel. That night, all the members of the community raised their voices and wept aloud.

All the Israelites grumbled against Moses and Aaron, and the whole assembly said to them, 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? And they said to each other, We should choose a leader and go back to Egypt.

[9 : 38] Then Moses and Aaron fell face down in front of the whole Israelite assembly gathered there. Joshua, son of Nun, and Caleb, son of Jephunneh, who were among these who had explored

the land, tore their clothes and said to the entire Israelite assembly, The land we passed through and explored is exceedingly good.

If the Lord is plentiful, He will lead us into that land, and a land flowing with milk and honey, and will 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. But the whole assembly talked about stoning them. Then the glory of the Lord appeared at the tent of meeting to all the Israelites.

Thank you, Amanda. So these chosen men, and the list of them is in verses 3 to 16, which we didn't read.

They set out on this reconnaissance mission, really. It's a scouting exercise to map out the territory. Moses wants to know what the land is like agriculturally and militarily.

[11:00] And so he asks for evidence of this in verse 20, if you look at that. So they set out, and the mission goes well. They reach Hebron, which is about 1,000 meters above sea level.

Presumably that's a good vantage point to scan the land. It took them 40 days, but they returned with the necessary information, and with a cluster of grapes, it says, so big that it took two strong men to carry it back.

The land is indeed fertile and fruitful. And so they return to the rest of the Israelites, who are camped in the wilderness in the desert of Paran.

They show them the fruit, and they report back. And the report starts really well. Verse 27, We went into the land which you sent us, and it does flow with milk and honey. Here's its fruit.

But then there's a but. Now, we all love a good committee, don't we? But this one begins to fragment and split.

[12:00] And it seems to split when they begin to describe the people that occupy the land. According to the majority of them, the inhabitants are powerful, it says, and the cities are fortified.

The descendants of Anak live there. Their name apparently means long-necked. So they probably did appear a little bit intimidating. But I'm interested in the language, really, that the spies use, because it does seem a little bit exaggerated.

If you look at verse 33, they say, We seemed like grasshoppers. There's a real fear in their comparison. And Caleb seems to be that lone voice in the midst of this group.

He says in verse 30, We should go up. We should take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it. He's this upbeat but isolated voice in the team.

The other spies lack the faith that Caleb has. And to justify their lack of faith, they spread a report that is full of contradictions.

[13:16] Because in verse 27, they're overflowing with excitement about the land. But by verse 32, they say the land devours everything.

Sorry, the land devours those living in it. Devours. That sounds quite ominous. As we know, language can influence minds.

It can change hearts. And so it proves. Should these spies have been fearful? Should they have feared what was going on? Maybe.

It must have been daunting, I guess, in one sense. But I think it's fair to say that they're looking at this challenge from a very human perspective. When they know that God has been with them so far, there's no sense at all that they see this from God's viewpoint.

Because they could have recalled the past. God's epic rescue of them from the Egyptian authorities. God's words back in Exodus chapter 3, verse 17, when he said to Moses, and I have promised to bring you up out of your misery in Egypt into the land of the Canaanites, a land flowing with milk and honey.

[14:28] You can't really get clearer than that. They'd also forgotten that God had actually helped them defeat the Amalekites back in Exodus 17 as well. And the God who had defeated the tyrants of old would help them overcome their new enemies.

And before long, the walls of those fortified cities would crumble under the blast of a trumpet. But the spies, they just couldn't see it. And the fear is infectious.

Before we know it, it spread from 10 of the spies to the entire gathering of the Israelites. If you look at verse 14, that night, all the members of the community raised their voices and wept aloud.

All the Israelites grumbled against Moses and Aaron. Fear turns to weeping, weeping turns to grumbling, and then grumbling turns to rebellion.

And the writer emphasizes how it spreads throughout the entire camp. There's this kind of grim solidarity between them. And I think there are voices that surround us, that can distract us from the promises of God.

[15:44] They too can play on our fears. As we seek to follow Jesus, we can or we will hear voices and encounter circumstances and obstacles in our lives that seem kind of insurmountable and that can sometimes cause us to cast doubt on our salvation and our destiny.

I was really encouraged when I went to the lounge, one of our Friday night youth groups a couple of months back, because that group has formed largely around the faithful witness of a few of our teenagers and, of course, some of our leaders.

And, by the way, a big shout-out to our leaders of our Friday night youth groups. These days, by 7 o'clock on a Friday night, I'm good for nothing. But these guys go out every Friday night and help our kids.

I think it's brilliant. But the children in the lounge, they're the ones who stand for Christ in their schools and they hear those doubting voices, I think, more than any of us.

And those voices are in the majority, like this group of spies, and they can dismiss the decisions that those young Christians might make and the priorities they might have as they live for Christ.

[17:00] When the voices make people seem big and God seem small, which is what's going on here, it can create doubt, which can lead to fear, which can then lead to panic.

And I think this can mean that we lose out on enjoying the promises of God as we live as Christians, missing out on the joy that walking with Christ can bring.

God promised to lead those Israelites back to the promised land and God has promised an eternity in his presence to all who trust in Jesus Christ.

I think when we lose sight of that, we're prone to being swayed in our faith. But I do think I need to qualify that. I think fears are normal and sometimes helpful.

If you read the Psalms, you encounter fear in the writer's words quite often. Jesus' disciples were often fearful. And some of us are impacted by fear more than others.

[18:02] But I think it's what this group does with their fears that causes the problem. Because for them, it leads to something stronger than fear.

It leads to defiance and rebellion. And I think this rebellion is an all-out assault on the character of God. It's insulting to him and it's a betrayal of him.

Honestly, they reject all that he's done for them in rescuing them from Egypt. In verse 2, they cry out, if only we had died in Egypt.

They also doubt his promises and his protection over them. They say, why has he brought us this far only to let us die by the sword?

That's in verse 3. They doubt his love for them. They say, our wives and our children will be taken as plunder. Would God really let that happen?

[19:06] Well, ironically, as part of their punishment, it's the children that end up inheriting the promised land and not them. We read that in verse 31 a bit later on. That they even dare to reject the salvation and the freedom that God has given them.

Wouldn't it be better for us to go back to Egypt, they say? Back to the brutal oppressors? Back to a time of slavery? And they also reject God's choices.

They say, we need to choose a leader and go back to Egypt. Choosing their own leader is a rejection of God because he's chosen their leader already, Moses.

I do think it's quite important to understand the extent of the rebellion because every one of our hearts is capable of it. The passages that I mentioned earlier where this story is retold later in the Bible all do this to serve as a warning to us.

But even in the moment, not just in these later passages, even in the moment, there are four participants in the story who recognise the depth of the sin going on here. Moses, Aaron, Joshua and Caleb.

[20:20] The last two, of course, were part of the team. They fall on their faces, it says. They tear their clothes and they plead with the Israelites. But it falls on deaf ears. In fact, it angers the Israelite community to the extent that they consider picking up rocks and stoning them to death.

And that's when God intervenes. Kim's going to come and read the next little bit for us. Numbers chapter 14 verses 10 to 24. The Lord said to Moses, How long will these people treat me with contempt?

How long will they refuse to believe in me in spite of all the signs I have performed among them? I will strike them down with a plague and destroy them, but I will make you into a nation greater and stronger than they.

Moses said to the Lord, Then the Egyptians will hear about it, By your power you brought these people up from among them and they will tell the inhabitants of this land about it. They have already heard that you, Lord, are with these people and that you, Lord, have been seen face to face, that your cloud stays over them and that you go before them in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.

If you put all these people to death, leaving none alive, the nations who have heard this report about you will say, The Lord was not able to bring these people into the land he promised them on oath, so he slaughtered them in the wilderness.

[21 : 58] Now may the Lord's strength be displayed just as you have declared. The Lord is slow to anger, abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished.

He punishes the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation. In accordance with your great love, forgive the sin of these people just as you have pardoned them from the time they left Egypt until now.

The Lord replied, I have forgiven them as you asked. Nevertheless, as surely as I live and as surely as the glory of the Lord fills the whole earth, not one of those who saw my glory and the signs I performed in Egypt and in the wilderness but who disobeyed me and tested me ten times, not one of them will ever see the land I promised on oath to their ancestors.

No one who has treated me with content will ever see it. But because my servant Caleb has a different spirit and follows me wholeheartedly, I will bring him into the land he went to and his descendants will inherit it.

Thank you, Kim. So God has pledged his love to these people as a promise, as a covenant but they've turned their backs on his love to them.

[23 : 13] They've disowned the freedom that's been given them and so we see in this remarkable exchange between God and Moses an extraordinary example of God's mercy and his righteous judgment.

In verse 11, God recognises the contempt of the people and their lack of faith and it seems he's prepared to eliminate them all, to destroy the nation in one go and start over again with Moses. It's extraordinary to disinherit the people but Moses intercedes and it's a powerful prayer and it's an interaction which I think is very God-centered and it's not self-centered and he asks for God's glory to be shown.

The Egyptians know that God is with his people and this is shown, of course, by the clouds and the fire by night. If they don't make it to the promised land, is God's reputation at stake?

Quite likely, according to Moses. Moses is committed to God's glory being displayed far and wide but he's also committed to God's character being revealed and he repeats the words that were given to him at Sinai.

[24 : 30] The Lord is slow to anger, abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion, verse 18. But he doesn't stop there. He knows there's something much deeper about God.

He says, yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished. He appeals for God's love and for mercy but he also knows that God is just.

God is just and righteous. He can and he must be both. He will forgive but as the moral arbiter of the entire universe, he must judge correctly and Moses recognises this.

I think it's quite a helpful reminder for our prayers. Moses is in an impossible situation here but his prayers don't turn in on themselves. In the midst of this mass rebellion, his focus is on the glory of God.

Maybe what Moses is praying here is a sort of Old Testament version of hallowed be your name at the start of the Lord's prayer for God's name to be lifted high. Effective prayer glorifies God and not ourselves.

[25 : 45] And Moses' plea is what the Lord provides, verse 20. I've forgiven them as you asked. Nevertheless, as surely as I live and the glory of the Lord fills the whole earth and then in verse 23,

not one of them will ever see the land I promised on oath to their ancestors.

Forgiveness is on offer but there is also judgment. There's a consequence. The people can't just now merrily saunter into the promised land and that consequence is death.

This generation will die in the wilderness. This judgment will take 40 years, one year for every day the spies spent on their mission. The group who went off on this mission had no faith.

They meet an immediate end in verses 36 and 37 and the others appear to wander off without God's presence against Moses' wishes and the chapter ends with defeat at the hands of the Amalekites and Canaanites.

I think it is worth recognising that the Bible does say quite clearly that death is a consequence of sin. Death was not part of God's original plan.

[27:00] It's not a natural process at all. It's devastating. And in Romans 6 we read the wages of sin is death but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

praise God this morning that even though death has not been removed it's still a consequence of sin. Its power over us has been broken at the cross.

In Christ we can live beyond death despite the fact that we will physically die. There's no denying that this is a sobering account.

It's an account that reminds us of the consequences of showing defiance towards God and having no faith in him. But I think to finish this account is also a really poignant and inspiring example of true faith.

So if it's faithlessness that is the downfall of most of this generation it's complete trust in the Lord that saves Caleb and Joshua. and I think it shows itself most of all when they appeal to people to have faith in verses 7 to 9 of chapter 14.

[28:19] What strikes me most of all when I read this through it is their kind of compassion for the Israelites that there's no evidence of their anger or personal judgment towards them but there's a real sadness and there's a grief and it's shown through the tearing of their clothes in verse 6.

they recognise the sin they see in the people and it's destructive forces so they remind the Israelites of the glory of God.

They remind them of his holiness his power the promise that God gives them and the fact that God walks with them through every trial in verse 9.

The Lord is with us they say. Joshua and Caleb's eyes were firmly fixed on their destiny. We should go and take possession of the land for we can do it says Caleb.

Their lives are rooted in the promises of God and they show this faith despite the opposition around them. Joshua and Caleb they made it to the promised land that there was excitement as they talked about it and there was the reality ahead.

[29:26] They were trusting wholeheartedly in God's strength and not their own in God's holiness not their own and in God's salvation not their own.

There were huge challenges still ahead for these two but if we fast forward to the book of Joshua we find these verses. God says to Joshua now then you and all these people get ready to cross the river Jordan into the land I'm about to give them to the Israelites.

I will give you every place where you set your foot as I promised Moses. No one will be able to stand against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses so I'll be with you.

I will never leave you nor forsake you. Joshua ends up leading God's people into the promised land. And what about Caleb? Well if you go ahead to Joshua chapter 14 we see him talking to Joshua and this is what he says You know what the Lord said to Moses the man of God at Kadesh Barnea about you and me?

I was 40 years old when I was sent out to explore the land. I followed the Lord my God wholeheartedly so here I am today 85 years old I'm still as strong today as the day Moses sent me out.

[30:42] Then Joshua blessed Caleb and gave him Hebron as his inheritance. We too have an inheritance of a promised land that can never perish spoil or fade kept in heaven for us and it's been brought for us once and for all by the work of Christ on the cross.

How did Joshua and Caleb get there? Through faith. We were thinking about the Olympics earlier. I used to work in a school where one of the teachers was an elite long distance runner and he ran as a guide alongside a blind runner at the Para Olympics and when I used to talk to him about it he said his role was to guide, was to prompt, to motivate, to advise, to pick up the athlete verbally

when he was tired and to support him if he physically stumbled but essentially his job was to just get him across the line.

The blind runner ran the race but it was the guide that got him across the line. In Jesus we have way more than just a guide.

For those who trust in Jesus today our rebellion, our grumbling, our sin has been paid for and it's been replaced with Christ's perfection.

The Bible puts it like this, God made him, Jesus, who had no sin to be sin for us so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

[32 : 26] Most of us won't have the energy of an 85 year old Caleb when the finishing line approaches but we have a saviour who's crossed that finishing line for us and he's gone ahead of us and he's tethered to us like that picture by his spirit to bring us home.

I think we can sometimes feel like we're in the wilderness. I don't know what your situation is right now but in some circumstances it seems like there are obstacles and there's just no way out and also sometimes it can feel to be honest like our faith is not like that of Joshua or Caleb but I've heard it said I think it was Tim Keller that said this it's not the strength of your faith but the object of your faith that actually saves you and that's Jesus who offers his salvation freely and he leads you to eternity with him.

I think it's worth trusting him to the finish line. Thank you.