

Living for God

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Preacher: Stephen Allison

- [0 : 0 0] when the pressures of work, family commitments, the pressure to conform to those around us in society, when all of that stuff starts to build, will we trust our God?
- Will we still place our faith in God? Will we demonstrate that faith by the way we live, by the decisions that we make day by day? I think sometimes the biggest problem that we can face as Christians is our own unbelief.
- That we can, not that we doubt that there is a God, not that we doubt intellectually that these things are true, but in the way we live, we demonstrate unbelief.
- We demonstrate unbelief anytime we fail to live as we ought to live, because we don't really believe that God is there watching and that God cares about what we are doing. Or we demonstrate our unbelief every time we fail to speak up for Jesus, because we are concerned that it will affect our friendships or we are concerned about what people think about us.
- We don't really, in those moments, believe that Jesus is the only way of salvation, that anyone who doesn't know him can never have an eternity with him and instead must face judgment.
- [1 : 1 1] What happens is that we tend to fear man rather than fearing God. And this can be a problem for all of us. Perhaps even today you're wrestling with a decision in your life, something that you know will have lasting consequences, and you have to decide, are you going to live for God or are you going to live for yourself or go your own way?
- Are you going to allow other things in this world to kind of take your, to make you afraid of them rather than fearing your God? Or maybe you're still struggling with the consequences of an ongoing decision that you have made.
- Or maybe today you're not a Christian yet and the decision that you're wrestling with is whether or not you will make a decision to follow God at all. The people in Numbers 13 and 14 also faced a crucial decision.
- They had to decide if they were going to trust in the promises and faithfulness of God or if they were going to go their own way. In verse 1 of chapter 13, they arrived at the promised land.
- They're on the border, ready to conquer it. This is what everything else, the promises of God, have been leading to from when God first started to deal with Abraham.
- [2 : 2 2] God promised that they would have this land. They had to go through the difficult times in Egypt, but God promised them that he would bring them back to this land and that this would be their land for their possession.
- The promises have started to reach fulfillment because the nation has grown massively. Two people become two million people. God has been faithful in his promise that he would grow the nation.
- He's also faithful in the fact that he describes this land as a land flowing with milk and honey, a lush and fertile land. The spies who go to the land in verse 23 find that that is true.

They go to the valley of Escho and they cut off a branch there which bears a single cluster of grapes that's so heavy that it takes two people to carry it.

So the land is a lush land. It's a fertile land. God is being true to his promises. Incidentally, that's actually the image used by Israel's ministry of tourism today to represent Israel, the carrying of that massive bunch of grapes because they still want to give this image that Israel is this lush and fertile land.

[3 : 33] So the spies come back and in verse 27 they begin their reports and all of the spies agree that the land flows, does indeed flow with milk and honey.

So all of the spies, even those that will go on to be unfaithful, agree with this fact that God is being faithful up to this point. But then there's a but.

But the people who live there are powerful and the cities are fortified and very large. We even saw the descendants of Anak there. The mood can change in an instant, can't it?

This should have been the moment when the people were ready to conquer the land. They should have been excited that finally they're going to enter this land. And instead the mood changes in an instant.

I was recently in a planning meeting for an organisation and we spent the morning coming up with these great ideas of what the organisation was going to do to advance. And then in the afternoon we invited in the member of staff that was going to have to carry out most of these plans.

[4 : 39] And suddenly the mood changed in an instant. All of the enthusiasm was gone and he just put a dampener on everything. Well at the end of the, at the end of the, at lunchtime we felt excited about the future.

By the end of the day that was no longer the case because the mood can change in an instant. And that's what the spies do here. The ten spies come back, the people are ready to take the land and they give the but.

They change the complete mood of the meeting. Basically these ten spies who give this report are overwhelmed by the fear of man. But there is a minority report.

Caleb silenced the people and he demonstrates his complete faith in God. He silences the people and tells them that they can.

We should go up and take possession of the land for we can certainly do it. And he's not alone, Joshua, as we see later in the passages with him. These two men demonstrate their faith.

[5 : 44] They demonstrate that they fear God rather than man. Now tragically we've read the passage and we know that the people followed the majority. And one commentator describes this as snatching defeat from the jaws of victory.

They got so close and yet fell so short. And then afterwards God appears and of course he's furious with the people. And we read then his judgment that comes as the consequences of these people's unbelief.

So as we look at this passage this evening we want to see what lessons can we learn when we come to face difficult decisions in our lives where we have to decide if we're going to follow God or if we're going to go our own way.

We need to decide like the people here are they going to trust that God is faithful and keeps his promises or are they going to be afraid of people and the situations around them.

So I want to look at this under three headings this evening. First of all we'll look at the fear of the people then the faith of Caleb and Joshua and then the fury of God. So let's start with the fear of the people.

[6 : 50] The people are essentially sent in these ten spies to do market research to prepare the people for the conquest of the land. Now from the first verse that we read this is the land that God is giving to his people.

They're not meant to come back and say oh I don't think we should do that. They're not meant to come back and question God's plan. They were meant to go in and find samples of the fruits in the land to find out about the land in order to really encourage the people that this is the land you should be going to.

That's why they were to bring back this fruit. But of course the ten people the ten spies come back filled with the fear of the people of this land.

They describe just how powerful and strong these people are and they see these nations as an insurmountable obstacle that they cannot conquer. They say they cannot win they think they will die if they go to it.

And then they're so worried because Caleb speaks up and gives a more positive report that they start to exaggerate the claims in order to deter the people from following Caleb.

[7 : 56] So they basically engage in fake news which is so popular at the moment. Or what is also always been known as propaganda where they take a grain of truth something that is true about it and they exaggerate that to basically discourage the people.

So the ten spies come back and they say in verse 32 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. And they go on to talk about the Nephilim that they saw there. Now that is true. The people they saw there some of them were of great size.

The Nephilim are the ones who Goliath was one of. So he was the giant that David would later face. So there are some people in this land that are large. That are scary people to engage in conflict.

But the races that have been described earlier there's more than just this one race. So to say that all of the people are very large is this way of propaganda. It's this way of creating this image that this is unsurmountable.

[9 : 05] They then go on to give even more propaganda when they say that we felt like grasshoppers. A grasshopper was basically the smallest edible creature in this time.

So to say they feel like grasshoppers is a bit like us saying they felt like shrimp. They felt like utter nothing. You can see how this is designed to create fear amongst the people. This is pure propaganda.

So instead of encouraging them, instead of doing what their job was meant to be, the spies tell them the land is too difficult to conquer and that they will die in the attempt. So the spies look at the nations as an insurmountable obstacle.

But their fundamental problem is that they have given in to unbelief. They don't believe that God is able to conquer these people. But it should never have been this way because there's a little detail in amongst the account that just gives a hint of this.

They went to the Negev and they came to Hebron. Now Hebron is quite an important place in the history of God's people because Hebron is where Abraham and Sarah are buried.

[10 : 12] It's where Isaac and Rebekah are buried. It's where Jacob and Leah are buried. This is a place that should have reminded the spies of their history, of these great people in the past, the patriarchs that God had been at work with, had made promises to and those promises were coming true.

And God was faithful to these people in the past. So they come to a place like Hebron. They were meant to remember what God had done. Instead, what we read about is that when they came to that place, they were more preoccupied by the many people that live there now.

They were focused on the people, not what God had done in the past. So the people start to rebel. And in chapter 14, we start to see this rebellion. Shockingly in verse 3, this rebellion is even against God, not just against Moses and Aaron.

It says, 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?

The people who have been enslaved for 400 years in Egypt want to go back to that rather than going into this land. They want to go back to the oppression and the slavery.

[11 : 24] Now these are the people who have seen firsthand what God did to free the people from Egypt. They've seen the plagues that God brought against Egypt. They saw God part the Red Sea, which seemed like an insurmountable obstacle.

These people saw these miraculous displays of God's power against Egypt, which was probably one of the strongest nations in the ancient world. And now they say that God cannot defeat these small city-states in Cana.

They're completely rejecting God's plan of salvation, of redemption. They're completely rejecting that God can actually save them, that God can actually defeat these nations.

They're saying he's not powerful enough. This would be like a Christian saying, basically, I wish Jesus had never died for me and that I just remained in my sin. That's how much they're throwing this back in the face of God.

So they're demonstrating that they don't believe God is sufficient. They're denying his power and his presence. Essentially, this shows so clearly their unbelief. And there's this shocking sinful tendency, isn't there, that to always go back to the former ways of life.

[12 : 32] Something actually we experience in our own life sometimes as well, that we always go back to the addictive ways of sin and despair, even after we see God working on our behalf. Because here's the thing, their unbelief is irrational.

We know that God has defeated Egypt, that they should know that he can defeat these nations. But if we're honest, so is our unbelief irrational at times. We know so much about what God has done for us in the past and what he has promised to do in the future.

And yet we still demonstrate by our actions our unbelief. So we proclaim that God is the one who created the universe out of nothing.

Yet we don't think he has the power to help us with our problems. Or we believe that God directs the course of history and kings and nations. And yet we find it hard to believe he can help our friends come to faith in him.

We believe that God entered history as a baby in Bethlehem. And yet we find it hard to believe that God is active in our own personal history. We believe that God and Jesus suffered on the cross for our sins and rose again triumphantly to free us from our sins.

[13 : 44] And yet there are some sins in our life that we think maybe God can't forgive that. Or maybe he can't help me with that besetting sin in my life that I can't get rid of. Our unbelief is just as irrational as the people's.

We know what God has done in the past. We know his promises. And yet we still sometimes refuse to fear our God. And inevitably when that happens we fear people rather than God.

And the circumstances get in our way. We start to get anxious. We get worked up. And we get too easily stuck inside our own heads. We're like a drowning man clinging to a heavy stone and we refuse to give up that unbelief.

But there is hope in this passage. And there is hope for us. Because there are people who demonstrate a different attitude. A different spirit as God later says.

Caleb and Joshua present the minority report. Like so many committees the committee who is sent into this land is not unanimous. There are two people who have a different version of the facts.

[14 : 47] Well, actually not a different version of the facts. They agree on the facts. They agree that this is a good land. They agree that the people are very strong. But they believe that God is able to conquer.

There is a story that is told in sales training kind of for motivation about a shoe salesman. He basically went to a far away country and he writes back in despair to his headquarters saying they don't wear shoes here.

No prospects for sales. A few years later another man went and he wrote back great prospects for sales here. They don't wear shoes. Two people can look at the same facts and come to a different conclusion.

And that's what happens here. We have the ten spies and we have Caleb and Joshua and they come to a different conclusion. Caleb says in verse 30 as we've seen we should go up and take possession of the land for we can certainly do it.

Now this isn't mere bravado. This is confident faith that God is with them. These are not the words of someone who just wants to go for a fight. This is someone who really believes that God will give them the land.

[16 : 03] And Joshua backs him up from verse 7. The land we pass through and explore 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 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 swallow them up. Their protection is gone but the Lord is with us. Do not be afraid of them. So how is it that these two groups of people who have both experienced similar things have both seen what God has done rescuing the people from Egypt.

How can these two groups of people come to such vastly different conclusions? Well the clue is actually in the text. In verse 27 in chapter 13 the people come and they give this report to Moses as we've already read.

and the people say we went into the land to which you sent us. Essentially saying we went to the land that you, Moses sent us to.

Whereas if we went back again to the first couple of verses in Numbers 13 this is the land that God is giving to them. Essentially the spies focused on the size of their enemies they focused on the obstacles and they left God out of the picture.

[17 : 19] They forgot all about him. And that was what made the difference between how Joshua and Caleb respond and how the ten spies respond. They look at exactly the same facts but Caleb and Joshua have the perspective of faith not unbelief.

They know what God is capable of. They remember the Lord's faithfulness in the past they remember that God had been with them they remember his promises and they have faith. Interestingly Joshua has fought one of the nations mentioned here in the past.

The Amalekites are mentioned as one of the nations that they are going in and in Exodus 17 Joshua is involved in leading the armies against the Amalekites.

Now this is the incident where Moses has to keep his arms up and they only win the battle as long as Moses has his arms up because God's involved in it and that's the sign that's being used. But what's very interesting is at the end of the battle when they've been victorious God makes a promise that he will wipe out this nation and he says make sure you tell Joshua what happened.

Make sure that Joshua knows that I was the one behind this battle that I was the one who helped them have the victory. So Joshua was being prepared in many ways for this day when he would go into the land he would see the nations of the Amalekites and he would remember that they had defeated them in the past with God's help and that these things would be possible in the future.

[18 : 51] Essentially what happens here is that the majority of the spies compared the nations to Israel and therefore they thought Israel will lose. Caleb and Joshua compared the nations to the Lord Almighty and that made all the difference because of course the Lord Almighty would defeat them.

This was the God who had parted the Red Sea before them. This was the God who had already defeated Egypt. Why would he abandon them now? So the question becomes for all of us who are we going to fear?

Are we going to fear people, man or are we going to fear God? That was the situation for Joshua and Caleb and it's the situation for each of us.

If you forget God ultimately you will fear men because you'll not believe that God is able to help you in the situation. So if we simply look at the obstacles that we face whether as individuals or as churches we know that we will be outmatched.

We will inevitably fall short if we're looking at it purely from a human perspective. Purely looking at it from what strength and might we have. I'm sure there are times when all of us have felt like grasshoppers.

[20 : 03] We've felt surrounded by insurmountable challenges and humanly speaking that possibly was true. You or I do not have the power to bring someone to faith in Jesus and you or I do not have the power to deal with sin in our life otherwise why would we need Jesus?

But faith recognizes that the world is not viewed correctly purely from a human perspective. Faith recognizes that God is at work that he is in control that this is his world and no matter how great the opposition if the Lord is pleased with us our future is assured.

If God's calling someone to become a Christian they will become a Christian. Even if it's only our weak words that they have to listen to God can use even the weakest of words even the poorest of presentations of who he is in order to bring people to faith in him.

And if God's at work in our hearts then we can be assured that one day our sins the problems we wrestle with will be fixed that one day we will be glorified with God. This knowledge that God is able to do this thing is the only thing that has helped God's people throughout the ages.

It's the only thing that has allowed people to stand up in faith for God in the midst of horrendous situations even worse than the world that we face now. Humanly speaking Joshua and Caleb looked utterly foolish but God was pleased with them and so Joshua and Caleb entered the land later.

[21 : 34] They inherited the land. Later there will be tales of how Joshua and Caleb defeat all of these nations that are mentioned here. They feared God and so they were freed from the fear of man and we have to follow their example.

So there's a sharp contrast in this passage between the fear of God and the fear of man depending on who you listen to. And the question for us then is which when we face a hard choice this coming week or these coming months which side will we fall on?

But before we get to that it's worth spending a bit of time thinking about the consequences of unbelief because that's the final point that we see in this passage and the final point this evening the fury of God because the assembly are furious with Joshua and Caleb and they are ready to stone them and then God steps in.

In the midst of the rebellion he steps in and declares his fury at the people's rebellion. He pronounces the judgment against the people. Now in our modern world we don't like to talk about the fury or wrath of God the judgment of God.

We find these things uncomfortable but the Bible is absolutely clear. God is a holy God and God will judge the wicked. He'll judge those who don't and not his people who are rebelling against him.

[22 : 56] And actually without that there is never any justice. We need the fact that God is a God of justice that he will judge in order for us to be assured that justice will operate in the world and the end of time God will judge the world.

But the question becomes do we believe in this God of judgment? Do we believe that in the end God will judge people and therefore we have to tell people about Jesus in order to show them there's a better way?

These words in this passage are extreme and we have to realize that these words are the fury of God against not the surrounding nations but against his own people.

That's how serious he takes this rebellion and how much this must have hurt God that these people who he had rescued who he'd been with were rebelling against him again.

He's forced by his own majesty and holiness to rise up in judgment even against his people so we see what that anger means to God. He's ready to wipe them out and yet Moses intercedes on behalf of the people.

[24 : 04] Now we could spend an entire evening looking at Moses' intercession and how he prays for the people. Essentially he goes to two truths. He says on the basis of God's glory and on the basis of God's merciful nature he prays that the people would be forgiven.

He acknowledges that the Lord is a God of justice and that the Lord is a God of mercy and he asks God in accordance with his promised faithfulness to the people his covenant mercy to forgive them despite the fact that they are in rebellion against him.

And God answers and does forgive them but their sin still has consequences just as we know that our sin has consequences that we can be forgiven and yet there can still be negative bad consequences in our life from decisions we make that are not the way God would have us live.

The people don't get the total annihilation they deserve but they're still going to be punished and ironically what God does as a punishment is he gives the people what they want.

The people said it would be better for us to have died in the desert. God says you'll die in the desert. He actually gives them exactly what they asked for. He grants their request and so the long term program of entering Canaan will be delayed until this whole generation of rebels have died out in the wilderness and a future generation will inherit the land.

[25 : 30] It's often said that the Old Testament is full of wrath and the New Testament is full of mercy but that's nonsense. We see here the truth that mercy and justice work side by side. God doesn't completely wipe out the people but he does punish their sin and this is an illustration actually of something that C.S. Lewis wrote in The Great Divorce.

He said this there are only two kinds of people in the end. Those who say to God thy will be done and those to whom God says in the end thy will be done. All that are in hell choose it.

Without that self-choice there could be no hell. No soul that seriously and consequently desires joy will ever miss it. Those who seek find. Those who knock. It is opened.

The people choose to die in the wilderness and God answers their request. And as we draw to a conclusion this evening that raises the question will we decide to follow God or follow our own desires?

Will we be people who say to God thy will be done? Or will we be people that demand that our will is done by God? The good news for all of us is that just like Moses stood and interceded on behalf of the people we have someone who intercedes for us.

[26 : 48] Jesus, God's own son. And what's interesting is that Moses had to rely on the character of God. He didn't have anything to bring. He merely asked on the basis of God's character that he would forgive the people's rebellion.

Whereas Jesus did so much more than that. Jesus went to the cross and paid the penalty that we deserved for our sin. He took the punishment. So that while the people had to face the punishment here, the consequences here, Jesus took the punishment on himself.

And following his resurrection, Jesus stands interceding for each of us, making sure that God knows that we are his people. And at the end of time, he's the one who will stand up at the judgment day and say, that person I died for.

I have already bared and borne the punishment that they deserved. If you're not a Christian here tonight, you have to make a decision. Will you bear the punishment yourself for all the wrongs that you've committed in your life?

Or will you place your faith in Jesus and his faithfulness and the fact that he has already done all the work? Will you demand to God that your will is done? Or will you humbly come to him and rest in him knowing that he has already done it all for you?

[28 : 03] You don't need to strive in your own power or strength any longer because Jesus has done all the work. And if you are a Christian here this evening, do you recognize yourself, your own persistent unbelief at times?

Do you recognize the times when you don't obey God, you don't put him first as you ought to? We all need to wrestle with this problem of unbelief in our lives because we are not perfect.

We need to follow the example of Jacob and Caleb, Jacob, Joshua and Caleb, who remembered the promises of God, remembered God's past faithfulness.

That was what allowed them to face the trials that came their way. We also need to remember the promises of God and his past faithfulness to us. We need to know that God is with us and God promises to be with us to the end of the age.

We need to know the promises that he has in store for us in the new heavens and the new earth. We need to know that Jesus rescued us on the cross as the ultimate demonstration of who God is, of his love for us.

[29 : 04] And we also have to recognize that the challenges that Joshua and Caleb and the people faced were real. This would not be an easy nation to conquer.

There would be difficulties in going in and conquering the nation. So we will also face challenges that are obstacles that we will encounter as a church and as individuals that will seem insurmountable to us and will be hard to get through.

But the promise of God is to get us through it, to be there with us and ultimately that he will restore all things. So when we come to face challenges and tough decisions this coming week and these coming months and years, we have to look to our God.

Remember that he is involved. Remember his promises to us, his faithfulness to us. And we also have to look to one another to support one another because that's one of the things the church is there for. Joshua and Caleb supported one another.

And that's what you see throughout scripture is this need for people to have support from one another. So as a church, that's one of the things we have to be able to do. So whenever we face challenges, we need to remember to cling on to the promises of Jesus and his faithfulness in the past.

[30 : 22] And we do need to pray like the man who said to Jesus, Lord, I believe, help my unbelief.
Let's pray. Father God, we do confess there are many times when we don't demonstrate
our belief in you.
we pray.