

Grumpy spies

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 21 May 2017

Preacher: Steve Ellacott

[0:00] Bible open at Numbers 13 and 14, page 149, as they say in the church Bibles. So the time is approximately two months after the departure from Sinai.

We know that because it mentions the first grape harvest, which is chapter 13, verse 20, which in our calendar is late July. So about two months after the people left Sinai and they've crossed the desert of Paran and are now in Kadesh, Kadesh Barnea, at the southern edge of the land of Canaan.

And they're about to proceed into the land of Canaan. How is it going to go? How will it progress? Well, the answer, as it turns out, is not well at all.

In fact, in these chapters, we really reach what one might say is the low point of the Exodus. There are lots of ups and downs in the Exodus, like the making of the golden calf at Sinai.

But this, perhaps, is really the low point of the whole thing. It's the point at which the Lord threatens to give up and, as it were, move to plan B in chapter 14, verse 2, and make a nation of Moses, it said.

[1:24] After this point in the book of Numbers, there's a slow process of rebuilding. But it is a very slow process. It takes 40 years, in fact. And yet, if this, in terms of the narrative, is the low point of the book, and this is where we're going to leave the book for the moment, for a few weeks doing something different anyway.

And yet, there is another sense in which this passage is the high point of the book. Because it is in this passage that the great themes of redemption are publicly discussed and debated.

You may have noticed as we read it, there are a lot more recorded words in these chapters than in most of the book of Numbers. Only really the words of Balaam are comparably recorded in such detail.

There's a debate. Opposing forces are permitted to state their views. And as I said, there's much more reporting of actual discussion than in most of the book.

And here is where the people ask the uncomfortable questions. Can the Lord really save? And then in Moses' great prayer, how can justice and mercy be reconciled?

[2:46] And indeed, how, in a sense, does salvation work? So there is much to be seen from this, say, troubling, certainly, passage. But one that actually has great themes of the Lord's promises and of redemption in it.

So it's quite a long narrative. I didn't really think one could justifiably split it, because it is all one narrative. The debate comes immediately from the report of the spies, and the prayer proceeds from that, Moses' prayer.

So I've read it all, the whole of the two chapters. There's a lot in it, so let's briefly go through the narrative. Just placing it a bit, but also pointing out a few things you might miss on the first reading. And then we'll see how some of these questions, these great questions, are stated and addressed. I'll divide the narrative itself up into three parts. First of all, the mission and report of the spies. That's from verses, chapter 13, right through into chapter 14, verse 10.

[4:00] And then, in chapter 14, from 10 to 38, we see the Lord's intervention and Moses' great prayer. And then there's a sort of coda on the end, for the aftermath, when they decide to go up anyway and are defeated.

So those are the main sections of the text. So let's look first at this mission and report of the spies. So first of all, the spies themselves.

One from each tribe is appointed. I'd obviously said each tribe has an investment in the project. We're given a list of names. They're not the same as the tribal elders from earlier. Presumably for this mission, younger and more adventurous men are needed. The representative of Ephraim, however, we have met before.

He's Moses' assistant. And he's given his original name in the list here, Hoshua. But there's a sort of note at the end of the list that Moses had renamed him Joshua.

[5:11] Now, why did he do that? Well, Hoshua means God saves. But Moses obviously thought that wasn't specific enough. So in changing it to Joshua, it means that Yahweh saves or the Lord saves.

He didn't want them to be in any doubt as to which God is involved here. It is the Lord who saves. And that's why Moses changed Hoshua to Joshua.

So there are 12 spies, one from each tribe. And where do they go? Well, the spies make first, it appears, for Hebron. Moses had told them to go into the hill country.

But they make more specifically for Hebron. You may say, why did they go there first? Well, one possible reason is that this is where Abraham had in fact received the promise that he would inherit the land.

That's probably why they went specifically to that place. That was where Moses had received that promise all those centuries before. And we note that Eshkon near Hebron is a grape growing area.

[6:26] According to the commentary, it has been through into modern times. But that's not the end of the mission. Let me just go briefly back to the map.

They head on up north, off my map here. Right up to the northern boundary of where the land is going to be. And then, of course, they come back south again and return to the people at Kadesh after 40 days to make their report.

So what does the report say? Well, they agree that, as advertised, the land does indeed flow with milk and honey. But, and there are several buts, the people who live there are strong.

You might note the phrase in chapter 13, verse 27, where the spies describe it as the land to which you, that is Moses, sent us. Well, that's true, of course.

It was Moses who sent them. But you might have, they might have said, this is the land to which the Lord sent us. But they didn't. They said Moses. Why? Because they're about to blame it on Moses, basically.

[7:40] So, there's a crisis. And it's Caleb who proposes proceeding with the invasion.

But the other spies disagree, saying that the inhabitants are too strong. And just note a few points of the phrasing and of the complaint that the people use.

There's a reference to being eaten. Chapter 13, verse 32 says, the land will eat us alive. Note chapter 14, verse 3, where they do mention the Lord leading them.

But they've concluded that the Lord has brought us here to die. And in particular, in verse 3, the complaint is that our wives and children will be captured.

So, the wives and children will become slaves of the inhabitants and the menfolk will be destroyed.

That's what they think is going to happen. And you might note that the people's objection is not so much, perhaps, to doubt the Lord's power, because they do acknowledge that the Lord has brought them that far.

[9:04] But perhaps it's to debate his goodness. They're wondering if they've been scammed, if they've been brought out into the desert on a pretext.

And that if, in fact, the Lord has no intention of leading them into the land, but has brought them out merely to destroy them. That's what they say, at least, in chapter 14, verse 3.

Whether it's the Lord's power they doubted, or the Lord's goodness, probably a bit of both. They certainly thought that there was no future in this invasion.

And so they hatch a plan. And the plan is to get rid of Moses and go back to Egypt. Chapter 14, verse 4. Moses, Aaron, Caleb, and now also Joshua, are horrified.

They tear their clothes, a sign of mourning. Chapter 14, verses 5 and 6. And they absolutely entreat the people not to rebel.

[10:09] Notice 14, verse 9. They say, no, no, the people, the land won't swallow us alive. We'll swallow them alive. The Canaanite shade is gone.

That's what it literally means. It's like a sunshade. Whatever was shading them from the, well, I suppose from the sun, but it obviously means the protection of their gods, is no longer there. Their shade is gone. Their protection is gone. All the people have to do is trust the Lord. But in spite of this impassioned speech, this entreaty is to no avail.

And the people are determined to rebel. But at this point, the Lord himself intervenes.

In chapter 14, verse 10. Notice the Lord refers to their own things. They'd said they were going to die in the desert. Okay.

[11:17] They'll die in the desert, as they said. Abraham's promise that had been given at Hebron, their inheritance, and that is what their inheritance was, ultimately.

They would inherit the land because it had been promised to Abraham. will pass to Moses. That's probably what the phrase means.

The exact translation of the word is debated, when it could just mean they will be destroyed. But the word Yara certainly can mean disinherited.

If you have an ESV or an AV, it says that they will be disinherited. And I think that actually seems to make more sense in the context. The Lord says they will lose their inheritance, that promise that they'd had from Abraham.

So it looks as though it's all over. They're going to die in the desert. They won't make it even back to Egypt. They'll lose their inheritance, and the Lord is going to start again with Moses.

[12:27] But Moses raises an objection. In fact, a crucial objection.

These other nations, the Egyptians and the Canaanites and the Amalekites, they know that these are the Lord's people.

So he says to the Lord, if you destroy them, then actually the people's rebellious claim that the Lord cannot save them and will destroy them in the desert will actually be proved to be true, won't it?

And yet, Moses acknowledges in verse 18 that the guilty must be punished. And that really, when he raises this question, how can the Lord show both mercy and justice?

And yet, you'll notice that what Moses pleads for in verse 19 is mercy for the people. And so what is the Lord's answer to this prayer, the Lord's solution, if you like, to the dilemma in the immediate terms, is to take the people at their words.

He says that, doesn't he, in verse 28, I'll do the very things I heard you say. Since you don't fancy the battle, then head back towards Egypt.

[13:47] Verse 25 says, go back towards the Red Sea where they had escaped from Egypt, although they were never going to make it because they wouldn't be able to cross the sea, for one thing. Those who despise me will not enter the land.

They will indeed be swallowed up, not by the Canaanites, but by the wilderness. The spies, you notice, who had created the problem were destroyed at once by a plague.

Verse 37. But the rest of that generation are going to wander in the desert until the children are old enough to enter the land. This is repeated several times, notice, in verse 22, in verse 23, and then again in verses 29 to 35.

The children, we are told, will inherit the land. And then, of course, just briefly, we notice there's an aftermath because the people rather foolishly decide to invade after all.

They say, now we're ready to go. But Moses said, no, it's too late. You've already rebelled. Don't go up without the Lord's presence. So Moses stayed in camp and the Ark and the Levites stay in camp.

[15:03] Some of the Israelites do go to try and attack the Canaanites, but they're defeated and driven back south. So that's the narrative, the story.

Now what can we say about this? Well, actually, this story became, in the scriptures, a sort of almost an icon of picture story of faithfulness and frustrated promise.

It's worth looking at a few passages that help our understanding. First of all, we remember that Abraham's promise itself had to be inherited by faith.

When Abraham was given the promise of Isaac, Genesis 15, 16, it says, Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness. And the psalm, that psalm that we sung, Psalm 106, the people's disobedience threatened disinheritance leaving that promise.

Psalm 106, verses 24 to 26, says the following, Then they despised the pleasant land. They did not believe his promise.

[16:26] They grumbled in their tents and did not obey the Lord. So he swore to them with uplifted hand that he would make them fall in the desert. As we saw, that psalm goes all through the events of the Exodus, showing how the people constantly failed and the Lord was constantly gracious.

And saved them. And of course, the point, as the psalm suggests, the point was not simply to look back and think, oh, isn't that awful. But we would all learn. The people would learn from the failures in the desert and not make the same mistake.

But remember that the Lord is faithful. Another psalm that you'll be familiar with, these words probably, Psalm 95, that also quotes refers to these events.

Psalm 95, verse 10 says, For 40 years, I was angry with that generation. I said, there were people whose hearts go astray and they have not known my ways.

So I declared on oath in my anger, they shall never enter my rest. So those two psalms specifically invite us to learn from these events.

[17:47] Another reference is Amos 5, 23 to 27, but I think I won't refer to that, but you might like to look it up later. And of course, in the New Testament, there are references to these events also.

So 1 Corinthians 10, verses 1 to 5, says the following. Quoting, both of course, really referring to Psalm 95.

For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers, that our forefathers were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea.

They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them and that rock was Christ.

Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them. Their bodies were scattered over the desert. And of course, as you're probably aware, the whole really of Hebrews 3 and 4 of Hebrews is just an exposition of Psalm 95.

[18:57] We won't read all of it, but here is an excerpt. This is Hebrews 3, starting at verse 15. As has just been said, today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion.

Who were they who heard and rebelled? Were they not all those Moses led out of Egypt? And with whom was he angry for 40 years?

Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the desert? And to whom did God swear that they would never enter his rest if not to those who disobeyed?

Notice, particularly, this next verse, which is verse 19. So we see that they were not able to enter because of their unbelief. Referring then, I guess, to that other psalm, Psalm 106.

Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it.

[20:12] So we were meant to learn from this story and as I say, it became almost an icon, almost a sort of standard story from which to illustrate the problems of faithfulness and disobedience.

So, there are some tricky questions that are up for debate here. Some tricky questions of theology. And so let's look at what the passage has to say about these questions and I'd like to look at three of them. First of all, is it faith or is it works that is important?

Secondly, this is really two questions but the passage deals with them in one so we'll treat it as one. Can the Lord really save or does unbelief frustrate the promise of the Lord?

And third, the question raised by Moses' prayer, how are justice and mercy to be reconciled? How can God keep his promise?

[21:21] How can the Lord keep his promise in the face of the disobedience of the people? So let's look first of all at this question.

How is it faith or works that is important? What does the scriptures say about the reason that they failed to enter the land?

And in fact, this passage and the other scriptures that we read that comment on it actually make it the answer to this quite clear, don't they? primarily, it's because of unbelief that they failed to enter the land.

It wasn't first a favour of what they did, it was a failure of their faith. It was because of unbelief, because they doubted the Lord's promise that they failed to enter the land.

And indeed, I think that's why we have that little coda stuck on the end of the description, because activity without faith, when they say, oh, well, now we're going to go up and attack the Canaanites, but that was without faith, without obedience, is actually disastrous.

[22:35] It is faith that is the key issue, believing the word of God. But, of course, one should add to that, it has to be the right kind of faith, the faith that Abraham had, that was counted as righteousness, was the faith that caused him to do what the Lord said and to trust in his promise.

It has to be the right kind of faith. They weren't supposed, of course, to just sit in the camp at Kadesh and wait for the Canaanites to up and leave. Their faith was to lead them into the land and to trust that the Lord was able to deliver the land to them.

Otherwise, they could have just sat there and waited for the people to go, but that wasn't what the Lord called them to do. He had promised to lead them into the land. They had to start the war.

And that reminds us, doesn't it, that saving faith, true faith, certainly requires action, certainly leads to action, leads to obedient action. And we're all familiar again with the words of James, the way he puts it, faith without deeds is dead.

he says, you show me your faith without what you do, I'll show you my faith by what I do. So yes, it is faith that enables us to enter the land, but it has to be the right sort of faith, the faith that leads to obedient action.

[24:11] salvation. And perhaps the key question here is, can the Lord really save, or does unbelief frustrate the promise?

That's the central issue here really, isn't it? That's precisely the issue that Moses raises. Is it a kind of self-fulfilling thing because the people don't believe the Lord's promise, then the Lord's promise fails?

Is that the case? And in fact, the answer it gives to this question is not quite as simple because it certainly is the case that unbelief has consequences, doesn't it?

There is a sense in which disobedience frustrates the promise for those people at least. The story makes that quite clear.

And other scriptures, in a sense, say much the same thing. The very last words of the last Old Testament prophet, Malachi. Well, let me read them to you. Malachi chapter 4, verses 4 to 6.

[25:28] And he starts by reminding him of the law of Moses. Remember the law of my servant Moses, the decrees and laws I gave him at Horeb for all Israel.

And then he talks of the prophet to come. See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers.

And we expect him to stop there, but he doesn't. There's a condition. He says, or else I will come and strike the land with a curse. Even the words of Moses, the Lord giver, or the power of the great prophet Elijah, can in a sense be negated and frustrated by unbelief and disobedience.

So yes, there is indeed a sense in which the disobedience and faithlessness of the people does frustrate the promise of the Lord. And yet, this isn't the ultimate answer.

And why? Well, for exactly the reason that Moses gives. If the promise of the Lord is frustrated, then the people will say that the Lord was not able to save.

[26:54] And that will be a true claim. If ultimately it depends on human obedience and human faith and human sinlessness or redemption, then it ain't gonna happen.

But Moses said that the Lord is able to save. It must be seen that the Lord is able to save. The nations should not be allowed to say the Lord was not able to bring these people into the land he

promised them an oath, so he slaughtered them in the desert.

What use ultimately is a promise if it's contingent on human sin and failure? I mean, you might promise a child an ice cream if they behave, but that's not saying much really, is it?

You know very well that it's more likely the child won't behave and quite likely won't get the ice cream, in a sense it's only a bribe anyway. The promise is contingent in that sense on the child's behaviour, but this is not the sort of promise that the Lord gives ultimately.

The Lord will be vindicated and how does it work out here? Well, the children will be made fit to enter the land, chapter 14 verse 31.

[28:26] Notice there's no condition there. This is an outright statement, but it's going to take them 40 years to learn the obedience and faith that is required to do it, but ultimately the Lord is able to save.

Ultimately, as Ezekiel said, the Lord can raise children of Abraham from dead bones, from dry bones. the Lord's promise will not be frustrated.

In this case, it might be delayed, but the promise to Abraham will be fulfilled, but it had waited several hundred years already. It was going to have to wait another 40 years, but in the end, it will come to pass.

The Lord can save, the Lord will save, the Lord does save, and the children will enter the land. But that of course raises the ultimate question.

You could say that this is perhaps the most important question of theology and perhaps that means it's the most important question there is. how are the justice and mercy of God to be reconciled?

[29:53] That's perhaps the most important question there is because it goes to the heart of the character of God himself. How can God show mercy to people whose hearts are naturally inclined to wickedness?

mercy? But on the other hand, if he does not, then how can his promise of mercy be fulfilled? Would it be better to give up and start again, as is suggested in chapter 14 verse 12?

But I don't think that was a serious suggestion. It was really just saying to Moses, well, what are you going to do about this? What are you going to say to me about this?

And anyway, would they have done any better? Well, Moses certainly raises the question, doesn't he?

Remember, chapter 14 verse 18. It says, the Lord is slow to anger, abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion, yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished.

[31:01] He punishes the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation. He doesn't actually say in detail how this works.

Moses is very clear that there must be an answer, there must be a resolution of justice and grace, but he's a bit hazy actually on how it works.

And the Lord himself is very clear, isn't he, that both mercy and justice must be served. His whole answer revolves around that. even the disobedient ones are not put to death immediately, but they won't enter the land.

And yet actually, the ultimate mystery of this is not explained here, is it? It's still left as an open question almost, as a kind of paradox.

The Lord is both just and merciful, but how does that work? And we only get hints of an answer here, and part of that answer is Moses himself, because you notice that Moses, the human prophet, stands as mediator here, doesn't he, between the Lord and the people.

[32:23] Generally, it was Aaron's job to be the mediator as high priest, but here actually it's Moses who serves as the mediator, not with a sacrifice here, but with a prayer, who prays for the people.

The people needed someone to pray for them, because they wouldn't do it for themselves. And yet, as we find in the subsequent tractors, neither Moses nor Aaron are the true and absolute mediators. Moses himself, in fact, is not able to enter the land. He makes mistakes. And so his own sin limits his effectiveness as a mediator, just as Aaron's own sin limits his effectiveness as a priest, who makes atonement.

And so, in fact, for a final answer to this question, the people had to wait a lot longer than 40 years. In fact, they had to wait for more than a thousand years.

But the question was answered, the mystery eventually was revealed, the secret was opened.

Paul's letter, in fact, Paul's letter to the Ephesians has a great deal to say on these very topics,

and we can't read all of it.

[33:49] But let me read the introductory verses, which summarize, really, the argument of the whole book, the whole letter. So, Ephesians chapter 1, verse 3, says the following, Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realm with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. What? How are we not holy and blameless?

What's he saying there? He chose us to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ in accordance with his pleasure and will.

In other words, the promise will not fail. It was set up before the beginning of the world. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons.

Why did he do it? Verse 6, to the praise of his glorious grace which he has freely given us in the one he loves. So that's where the mercy comes in.

[35:05] And how does it all work? Well, in verse 7 we find the answer to that. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding.

And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure which he purposed in Christ to be put into effect when the times would have reached their fulfillment to bring all things in heaven and earth together under one head, even Christ.

It's Jesus Christ that is through Jesus Christ that all the promises and questions find their fulfillment. That's not to say, and I think it's worth making this point, sometimes say, well all things are brought together in Christ and therefore the answers have no meaning, no content.

I don't think he means that. some people study cosmology in order to say, let's prove that God did not say, let there be light.

But Christians can study cosmology to understand what God meant when he said, let there be light. If you want to understand quantum physics, you have to put in a fair bit of effort.

[36:38] You have to learn about partial differential equations and you have to learn about probability theory and even then you'll find it's pretty hard going. Don't start studying quantum theory unless you're prepared to put a fair bit of effort into it.

But if you do, that's not wasted effort. You will certainly learn something fundamental about the nature of reality. But this also happens under the lordship of Christ who showed us that even in his earthly life he was lord over nature.

And these questions say the answers are not without content. If you want to know how salvation works, how justice and mercy are reconciled, then you need to study the death and resurrection of Christ.

And you need to study and see how he is the mediator between God and man. Paul gave us the answer in that passage, didn't he, to that question.

How are grace and justice reconciled? In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace.

[37:56] grace. So let's finish our study with those words going back to numbers, those words of Moses' prayer.

anger. 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 fathers to the third and fourth generation. So let us, when we get discouraged, when we're tempted to turn back on the boundaries of the land, to not fight our way to Canaan's land, let us put our trust in the Lord who has promised, and the Lord is the one who really can save.

We all doubt that sometimes, don't we? We all panic, we all have fear, but these things are to show us that the Lord can indeed save. The criticism of the nations is not a fair one.

The Lord's made the promise, and it will be fulfilled through Jesus Christ. Amen. So let's... Let's go.