

Blessing and Responsibility

[This afternoon at 4—men’s day music fest at Wayman AME!]

Turn with me to Numbers, chapter 13. Today we’re going to be looking at a passage of Scripture that will sound familiar to those of you who grew up going to Sunday school. For some reason this was a popular Bible story.

Before we dig into the story, let’s watch an overview of the book of Numbers.

[Numbers video] In this series, we’re taking some snapshots of Israel’s Exodus out of Egypt and into the Promised land to see the lessons they learned (or didn’t learn) in the process. In the passage today, the Israelites have come to the edge of the Promised Land.

The Promised Land was the future that generations of Jews had dreamed about. It’s kind of like Minnesotans around this time start dreaming about moving to somewhere warmer—only a thousand times better! Children would ask their parents, “Dad, tell me again about what the Promised Land will be like.” There’s a reason why so many of the old slave songs refer to the Promised Land. It’s the image of freedom and God’s blessing as a reward for the struggle. So, can you imagine being a part of that group that was now on the cusp of realizing that dream?

That’s the setting. Now, let’s walk through the passage and I want to point out three lessons we learn from this story. **[Read 13:1-3,17-20]** Now, we refer to the stories

in the Old Testament as history. And that's true, they do have historical value. But ancient people, including Scripture, didn't have the same goals as modern history. Our history today wants to get the facts right. Like Joe Friday, "just the facts ma'am."

The goal of ancient history wasn't just the facts. There *were* facts, but the goal was theological. If you wanted to write a complete history of the people of Israel, it would take a whole lot more than just the Old Testament. It doesn't include every story—only the ones that reveal who *God* and how he relates to people. So, even though it wasn't written about us today, there is much we can learn from it, and today I think we can learn three lessons from this story in Numbers 13 and 14.

As I read this section, there was a question that occurred to me—a statement that seemed to reveal a contradiction. The statement is in verses 1-2, **"The Lord said to Moses, 'Send some men to explore the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the Israelites.'"** Here's why this is so strange. For hundreds of years, since the time of Abraham, God had told the Israelites he was going to give them the land. When I think of God giving someone land, I think of walking in building a house. So if God was going to give them the land why did he have them send in spies?

Now, you might think, *"Well, they just needed to scout the land and check out good places to settle."* Which is partially true, but if you read carefully, he asks two kinds of questions. The first is "what is the land like." Verse 18,19, **"See what the land is like...is it**

good or bad?” Verse 20, “How is the soil? Is it fertile or poor? Are there trees in it or not? Do you best to bring back some off the fruit of the land.”

But then there’s the second set of questions, **“Are the people who live there strong or weak, many or few...?”** Then a little further in 19, **“What kind of towns do they live in? Are they unwalled or fortified?”** They weren’t just scouting to see where they should settle. This set of questions were, “How can we defeat them?”

And that takes us to lesson number one. **“Even when God blesses, we still have to work.”** In fact, we could replace “work” with other words—we still have to struggle, plan, strategize, act, labor.

One of the common misunderstandings about God today is that he wants to give us an easy life. This is why the prosperity gospel is so popular and why it’s so tempting to believe the gospel of “God just wants me to be happy.” We think God’s blessing should come with no strings attached. But this story—and Scripture in general—shows us that God’s blessing comes with responsibility. It happens in two ways.

Sometimes, God blesses first, but expects us to share the blessing with others.

God’s blessing is never for you to hoard. That’s why generosity isn’t just something good for Christians to do—it’s a core value. If you’re blessed with the ability to make money, but you are not generous, you’re lacking a central character trait of a follower of Jesus.

Some of you don't have much, so you have less to give. You don't have to feel bad about that, there are other ways to be generous. But most of us have more than enough, but we're hoarders. By that, I don't mean that you have rooms full of shoes or 27 cat scratching posts. But hoarding is an attitude of possessiveness. When God blesses us financially, it's OK to enjoy some. But you might say that God never just gives us a blessing, he *entrusts* us with it.

But oftentimes, God expects us to exercise faith *before* we receive the blessing. In fact, while we look at outcome as the blessing, God considers the character we develop to get there as just as much of a blessing because his goal is to mature us into people who he can trust with a blessing.

We want God to bless our church. We want to have a vibrant and exciting church that continually experiences the fruit of God changing lives. That's the Promised Land for a church. But that won't happen just because we want it. We have to pray, plan, and act in faith and work diligently. The combination of God's power and wisdom and our diligence is a powerful recipe. *Even with God's blessing, we still have to work. //*

Lesson number 2, *Leadership matters*. The spies, who were the leaders of the tribes of Israel, knew that they were scouting the land strategically. So, for 40 Days, they scoped out all the details, answered the questions, brought back some of the fruit. Here's verse 26. **[Read 13:25-27]** Basically, they said the Promised Land is everything we hoped

it would be. Milk and honey waterfalls! Everyone's dream. (unless you're lactose intolerant!)

But then comes the big BUT! Verse 28-29, **[Read vs 28-29]** What the ten spies were saying was, *"Yeah, the land is great and it would be awesome to live there, but the challenge of taking the territory is too great. We don't think we can do it and we're not willing to take the chance."* In verse 32, they even did some active campaigning—the spread a bad report among the Israelites saying, *"It devours those living in it. There are giants there. We look like grasshoppers compared to them."* These are the leaders.

We live in a society that of mistrusts or undervalues leadership. We live in a society that thinks it's a democracy, a lot of people believe the best way to govern is by majority vote. Now, I believe it's a good thing in a country for the people to be able to vote for their leadership. The problem is that we live in a time when our elected leaders won't like to lead. They just watch for what the polls say and do that.

But sticking your finger in the air and seeing which way the wind is blowing is not leadership...certainly not Biblical leadership! Even when people vote for their leadership—Biblical leadership is when wise and godly men and women discern where God is leading and move the church in that direction.

This is critical because the nature of groups, including churches, is to be *anxious* or *ambivalent*. Fear and negativity in a group are like a boulder sitting on the side of a hill. Give it a little shove and it will generate momentum really fast.

When the spies, who were supposed to be their leaders gave the bad report, things spiraled out of control. Look at how the people responded to the ten spies' "leadership." [Read 14:1-4] It doesn't take a leader to generate fear or apathy.

But the task of leadership is to struggle against those—to give a calm assurance and to keep people moving in the right direction. A lot of people want have positions of leadership, but when they get there, they don't want to lead. Leadership is struggle. We think it should be different in the church, but it's not...because Christians are a lot like people. And people are prone to fear and apathy.

So, for the Christian leader, the way to fight that is to stay focused on God's *promise* and his *presence*. There were two spies named Caleb and Joshua, who were on the same scouting trip, but gave a much different report.

They saw the same land, the same trees, the same fruit, the same people, the same fortified cities, but their report is much different. 14:6, **“Joshua...and Caleb...who were among those who had explored the land, tore their clothes (grieved by Israel's response) and said to the entire Israelite assembly, “The land we passed through and explored is exceedingly good. If the LORD is pleased with us, he will lead us into that 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.”

The church needs leaders like this. Whether you’re a pastor, on the board, a ministry leader a small group leader or even if you’re someone who isn’t in a position of authority right now, there’s an axiom—“leadership is influence,” we need you to stay focused on God’s Promise and His presence.

Anyone can be negative and pessimistic. But leaders in the church need to have a godly optimism, not burying our head in the sand, but the conviction that God is with us and wants what’s best for us. Leadership is the willingness to communicate that even if God leads us into hard things, He will be with us and it will be worth it in the end. If we could just keep our eyes on those two things, imagine what God could accomplish through us! Leaders, let’s step up! Leadership matters! ///

Third lesson: There’s a cost for not going. In the end, Caleb and Joshua were outnumbered and the people of Israel gave in to the anxiety that plagues groups. They wanted to replace Moses with a leader who would lead them back into slavery.

I find it interesting as I read through the story of the Exodus how many times the people of Israel say they want to go back to Egypt. They just spent the last two years wandering through the wilderness, which I have to admit wouldn’t be any picnic. When

they were up against the Red Sea and the Egyptians were coming, they grumbled and said, *“We would rather be slaves in Egypt than die in the wilderness.”*

Then, after God miraculously rescued them by parting the Red Sea, they complained that they didn’t have enough to eat. When God provided manna they complained they didn’t have enough variety in their diet. It went on and on.

Here’s the irony of it, they complained the entire time they were in the wilderness, but now that they were on the edge of the Promised Land, the task of taking the land was so daunting they said, **“We should have died in the wilderness.”** (14:2)

So, fittingly, God gave them what they wanted. **“²⁸As surely as I live, declares the Lord, I will do to you the very thing I heard you say: ²⁹In this wilderness your bodies will fall—every one of you twenty years old or more who was counted in the census and who has grumbled against me. ³⁰Not one of you will enter the land I swore with uplifted hand to make your home, except Caleb son of Jephunneh and Joshua son of Nun. ³¹As for your children that you said would be taken as plunder, I will bring them in to enjoy the land you have rejected. ³²But as for you, your bodies will fall in this wilderness.”**

The Israelites thought they were making the safe choice by not following God and battling the Canaanites. But in the end, their decision not to go, cost them much more. God wanted to give them the dream that had been passed down from family to family

over centuries. He wanted to make them more than slaves and more than wanderers. But they weren't willing to act in faith, so they settled...and they died in the wilderness.

In my years in ministry, I've found that there are too many people who settle for being *slaves* or *wanderers* when God has promise them much more. Maybe that's you. Maybe because you're not willing to take hold of God's promise of a new life, you've allowed yourself to become a slave to pleasure, or comfort, alcohol, social media, pornography, work, image. Or maybe you've managed to avoid all that, but you end up wandering...dabbling in religion or generic spirituality, but never really committing to the God who created you, loves you, and wants to bless you. At the time you didn't realize that's what's happening, but it's when you look back that you realize the price you paid.

You've settled for *pleasure* and it cost you *meaning*. You were a *slave* to *alcohol* and it might cost you your *marriage*. You're a slave to bitterness and it cost you peace. You're a slave to what other people think about you but it's costing you meaningful relationships.

Well, whether you're a slave or a wanderer, I believe God has called you to much more. So, maybe it's time to decide. Maybe it's time to ask God to show what is the life he wants from you. Maybe not even the whole thing, but what's the next thing? Maybe you already know, but you've never given in to that vision. Maybe you know that in order to get there, you'll have to fight some battles against sins, habits or addictions that have

enslaved you. Or maybe you've just been spiritually lazy. You've forgotten how empty and meaningless it is to wander in life and never really commit.

Wherever you are, we're going to take a few minutes here today. I really have three questions for you to take home with you and think deeply about, but in the service here, we're going to focus on the first. I have the question in your notes. The question is, What's the Promised Land God has for you right now? What is the life God wants? And I have a list—it might not be any of these, but maybe one off them hits home with you.

And I want you to take a few moments, close your eyes and pray and ask God, *What promise do you have for me? What do you want for my life?*