

September 22 Lesson 4 (NIV)

FAITHFUL DESPITE UNFAITHFULNESS

DEVOTIONAL READING: Psalm 106:1–12, 48

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Numbers 13:1–14:10a

NUMBERS 13:1, 2, 17, 18, 25–28

¹The LORD said to Moses, ²“Send some men to explore the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the Israelites. From each ancestral tribe send one of its leaders.”

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¹⁷When Moses sent them to explore Canaan, he said, “Go up through the Negev and on into the hill country. ¹⁸See what the land is like and whether the people who live there are strong or weak, few or many.”

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²⁵At the end of forty days they returned from exploring the land.

²⁶They 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. ²⁷They 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. ²⁸But the people who live there are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large. We even saw descendants of Anak there.”

NUMBERS 14:1, 2, 5–10A

¹That night all the members of the community raised their voices and wept aloud. ²All 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!”

.....
⁵Then Moses and Aaron fell facedown in front of the whole Israelite assembly gathered there. ⁶Joshua son of Nun and Caleb son of Jephunneh, who were among those who had explored the land, tore their clothes ⁷and said to the entire Israelite assembly, “The land we passed through and explored is exceedingly good. ⁸If 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. ⁹Only 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.”

^{10a}But the whole assembly talked about stoning them.

KEY VERSE

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.—Numbers 14:8

RESPONDING TO GOD'S GRACE

Unit 1: God Is Faithful

LESSONS 1–5

LESSON OUTLINE

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 - A. Produce of the Land (vv. 25–27)
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 - B. Concerned Leaders (v. 5)
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 - Mutiny!*

Conclusion

- A. Words Printed in Yellow
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HOW TO SAY IT

AnakAy-nak.

AnakitesAn-a-kites.

CanaanKay-nun.

HamathHay-muth.

HebronHee-brun or Heb-run.

JephunnehJih-fun-eh.

Kadesh Barnea *Kay-desh* **Bar**-nee-uh.

Negev *Neg-ev*.

Paran *Pair-un*.

Sinai *Sigh-nye* or *Sigh-nay-eye*.

Introduction

A. What Do You See?

Dale Carnegie (1888–1955) is probably best known for his self-help book entitled *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. Carnegie authored another book of the same style; its title is *How to Stop Worrying and Start Living*. In it he included this brief but thought-provoking illustration: “Two men looked out from prison bars / One saw the mud, the other saw the stars.” Two individuals can be in the same challenging, perhaps even desperate, situation and see it quite differently.

The children of Israel faced the challenge of conquering the promised land. Two outlooks emerged on whether this feat was possible. This was not a matter of mud vs. stars; it was a matter of unbelief vs. faith.

B. Lesson Context

The previous study covered an incident that occurred on the fifteenth day of the second month after the Israelites’ exodus from Egypt (Exodus 16:1; see lesson 3). On the first day of the third month, the Israelites entered the Desert of Sinai (19:1). There they camped before the mountain where the Lord established his covenant with the Israelites and gave his Ten Commandments and other laws to them.

The Israelites stayed at Mount Sinai for a little less than a year (comparing Exodus 19:1 with Numbers 10:11), in what should have been a sacred time of dedicating themselves to be God’s covenant people. But the attitude of rebellion and discontent that we saw demonstrated in last week’s lesson (Exodus 16:2, 3) reappeared at the foot of the mountain. Sadly, while Moses was on the mountain receiving God’s laws, the people were breaking them (specifically the first two of the Ten Commandments) by building a golden calf and attributing God’s mighty act of deliverance from bondage to the gods the calf represented (32:1–4).

Thus, perhaps it should come as no surprise that as the people traveled from Mount Sinai toward the promised land, their grumbling and discontent were right by their side. Once the Lord sent a fire to burn among the people, which consumed the fringes of the camp. Moses interceded on the people’s behalf, and the fire died down (Numbers 11:1–3). Then the “rabble” (11:4; likely comprised of non-Israelites who had chosen to journey with the Israelites; compare Exodus 12:38) initiated a complaint about growing tired of the manna provided by God. They claimed as they had done previously that living in Egypt was so much better than journeying through the desert (11:5).

At this point, Moses became extremely frustrated with the people’s behavior and voiced his frustration to the Lord. The Lord provided 70 men from among the elders of Israel to assist Moses with leading the people for a time (Numbers 11:25). The Lord also responded to the people’s

complaint with a provision of quail (11:31, 32), similar to what he had done in the Desert of Sin (Exodus 16:1, 12, 13).

Still, the grumbling did not end. Moses' brother Aaron and sister Miriam lodged their own protests against Moses, expressing an envy of Moses' position of authority (Numbers 12:2). The Lord responded by afflicting Miriam with leprosy. She was quarantined for seven days, during which time the people paused their travels. When their journey resumed, they reached the Desert of Paran (12:16) and specifically Kadesh Barnea (Deuteronomy 1:19), where today's lesson text begins.

I. Responsibility (NUMBERS 13:1, 2, 17, 18)

A. The Lord's Command (vv. 1, 2)

1, 2a. The LORD said to Moses, "Send some men to explore the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the Israelites.

The Israelites are on the verge of a great turning point in their history. The time has come for preparing to enter *the land of Canaan*, which God had promised centuries before to give to Abraham's descendants (Genesis 13:14–17; 15:18–21). The land as a gift from God is emphasized throughout the history of God's dealings with the Israelites (Exodus 6:4, 8; Leviticus 23:9, 10; 25:38; Numbers 10:29; Deuteronomy 6:23; 28:11; etc.).

The people themselves have certainly done nothing to earn such a gift, but *the Lord* is committed to fulfilling his promise to Abraham. As with any gift, the giver sets the terms of how and when it will be given. In this case, the Lord determines how and when his people will receive the inheritance of land he has promised to give them.

2b. "From each ancestral tribe send one of its leaders."

The Lord tells Moses to *send ... leaders*, one for each of the 12 tribes, who will search out the land of Canaan prior to the nation's entry. Each man is to be someone who is trusted and respected by his *tribe*.

When Moses refers to this process later while speaking to the second generation of Israelites, he will say that the Israelites came to him and suggested sending men to spy out the land (Deuteronomy 1:22). But this should not be seen as a contradiction of the account in Numbers. Most likely the people offer their proposal, then the Lord gives his approval to what they have suggested. Numbers 13:3–16, not in the printed text, lists the 12 men who are chosen for this task.

B. Moses' Counsel (vv. 17, 18)

17. When Moses sent them to explore Canaan, he said, "Go up through the Negev and on into the hill country.

When one examines a map of this territory, it shows that *Moses* sends the spies north from Kadesh Barnea, where the people are currently camped. The spies are to explore *the Negev*, the Hebrew word that means "south." This indicates the territory south of that which will eventually make up the land possessed by Israel. Moses also instructs the 12 men to go *into the hill country*. The instruction to explore the Negev and the hill country will result in the spies' exploring the entire land.

18. "See what the land is like and whether the people who live there are strong or weak, few or many.

Moses specifies what the 12 men are to look for as they carry out their mission. They are to examine the terrain. Then they are to observe *the people who live there*. Are they *strong or weak, few or many*? Though God has allowed their proposed espionage mission (see commentary on Numbers 13:2b), 20/20 hindsight indicates that it would be better for the people to trust God to give them the land without their scouting it out, given the fear their mission ultimately causes (see commentary on Numbers 13:28; 14:1, 2, 9, 10).

Numbers 13:19, 20 (not in our printed text) records additional instructions to the spies, concluding with the exhortation, “Do your best to bring back some of the fruit of the land” (Numbers 13:20). Verses 21–24 record the itinerary of the group, noting that they gathered some of the fruit of the land (grapes, pomegranates, and figs). Their travels took them as far north as Lebo Hamath (13:21), which eventually became the northern boundary of the promised land (34:8).

II. Report

(NUMBERS 13:25–28)

A. Produce of the Land (vv. 25–27)

25. At the end of forty days they returned from exploring the land.

Moses has not specified how long the spies’ journey is to take. He is probably more concerned that the land be searched carefully and thoroughly than he is with a specific timeline. Given the territory the spies have covered (from Kadesh Barnea north to Lebo Hamath is approximately 250 miles), a time of *forty days* is reasonable.

The number 40 often indicates the significance of a period of time (see Genesis 7:4, 12, 17; 8:6; Jonah 3:4; Matthew 4:1, 2; Acts 1:3; etc.). The story of the exodus contains three good examples. Moses’ life is broken into 40-year increments (Exodus 7:7; Deuteronomy 34:7), and he fasts for 40 days (Exodus 24:18; 34:28; Deuteronomy 9:9, 18). Including the years before the spy mission, the people wander for 40 years, the time given for a generation to pass away (Numbers 14:34; 32:13).

26. 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.

The 12 display their sample of *the fruit of the land*, including a single cluster of grapes so large that it requires two people to carry it on a staff (Numbers 13:23). The initial reaction of the people must have been one of wide-eyed amazement and anticipation, especially after all the time spent in *the Desert of Paran*, where comparatively little grew.

27. 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.

The spies report back to *Moses*, who had given them their instructions. He had told the spies to report on essentially two items: *the land* and the people.

The phrase *flow with milk and honey* signifies an abundance of good things. When the Lord first called Moses to lead the Israelites out of bondage, he told him that the land was “flowing with milk and honey” (Exodus 3:8). Moses gave that same description to the people as they departed from Egypt (13:3–5). The people can see for themselves, judging from the *fruit* before them, that the words are no exaggeration.

B. People of the Land (v. 28)

28. “But the people who live there are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large. We even saw descendants of Anak there.

While the land offers much to be desired, *the people who live there* are another matter altogether. They are powerful, and *their cities are ... very large* and well-defended. The *descendants of Anak*—called Anakites—are a people group known for being exceptionally “strong and tall” (Deuteronomy 9:2).

The spies who do not believe the land can be taken will refer to them as “Nephilim,” or giants (Numbers 13:33). These are the very people whom courageous Caleb, one of the 12 spies, will drive out of Hebron 40 years later so that he can possess that portion of the promised land (Joshua 15:13). In fact, the three sons of Anak named in Numbers 13:22 are the ones Caleb will defeat (Joshua 15:14)!

In Numbers 13:30 (not covered in today’s text), Caleb responds to the claims about the formidable inhabitants of Canaan. He remains confident that the Lord will defeat these foes. But Caleb quickly finds himself in a minority; out of the 12 spies, only he and Joshua (not noted as part of the minority until Numbers 14:6, below) believe that the Lord will keep his promise. Their faithful voices are outweighed by the other 10 spies, who are intimidated rather than inspired (Numbers 13:31–33).

III. Response

(NUMBERS 14:1, 2, 5–10a)

A. Cries of Anguish (vv. 1, 2)

1. That night all the members of the community raised their voices and wept aloud.

It does not take long at all for the negative outlook of the 10 spies to dampen the enthusiasm of the entire *community*. Cries of despair are heard that very *night* throughout the Israelite camp.

2. 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!”

As they did in last week’s study, the people begin to grumble *against Moses and Aaron* (compare Exodus 16:1, 2). They also voice their wish that God had taken their lives, either *in Egypt* or *in this wilderness* (compare Exodus 16:3; Numbers 14:22–24). It is sobering to consider how the nation has managed to push out of their collective memory the mighty works that God has done for them in their own experience, going back to the 10 plagues in Egypt. To claim that the Lord has brought them into the promised land to die is utter blasphemy.

What Do You Think?

Under what circumstances, if any, is it appropriate to express concern publicly over the actions of leaders or members of the congregation?

Digging Deeper

How do passages such as Acts 18:12–16; 21:27–36; 1 Corinthians 6:1–4; and 14:40 help you answer this question in terms of issues within the church vs. violations of secular law?

B. Concerned Leaders (v. 5)

5. Then Moses and Aaron fell facedown in front of the whole Israelite assembly gathered there.

In Numbers 14:4 (not in today's printed text), the people propose that they mutiny against the leadership of *Moses and Aaron* and return to Egypt. Moses and Aaron sense the gravity of the people's demand and fall *facedown*. Perhaps this reflects a combination of emotions: fear of the Lord, alarm at the possible outpouring of his wrath against the people, and shock at such a brazen act of defiance.

C. Courageous Leaders (vv. 6–9)

6. Joshua son of Nun and Caleb son of Jephunneh, who were among those who had explored the land, tore their clothes

The two courageous, faith-inspired spies, *Joshua* and *Caleb*, express their anguish at what the people are doing: turning against Moses and Aaron and ultimately against the Lord.

7. and said to the entire Israelite assembly, "The land we passed through and explored is exceedingly good.

The other 10 spies have caused the people's attention to dwell on and be discouraged by the residents of Canaan and the size of their cities. Joshua and Caleb now remind the people of the *exceedingly good land* that lies within their grasp.

8. "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.

Joshua and Caleb highlight the most important factor in taking the *land: the Lord*. He has not brought the Israelites this far to let them die (contrast Numbers 14:3). He *is pleased* with them; he has made a covenant with them; he has shown them his favor on repeated occasions (Exodus 12:1–13; 14:21–29; 16:4, 5; 17:5–7; etc.). He will lead them into that land and *give it* to them.

The emphasis on the promised land as God's gift to the people is clear (see commentary on Numbers 13:1, 2a). The giver will not desert his people or break his promise to them. Joshua and Caleb also remind the people again of the exceptional abundance of the land (see commentary on 13:27, above).

9. "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."

Joshua and Caleb plead with the people not to *rebel* or *be afraid*. The people have grumbled, murmured, and rebelled against *the Lord*, testing his mercy and patience. Joshua and Caleb likely sense that judgment will follow if the people do not repent.

Joshua and Caleb describe the residents of the promised land as something to be devoured. The expression means that the Israelites can easily defeat them, or "have them for lunch." Their size, the strength of their cities, and whatever weaponry or defenses they possess are non-factors. All of that is totally worthless when the Lord *is with* his people. If he is, and there is no question of that for Joshua and Caleb, then there is no need to fear the inhabitants of the land (compare Isaiah 8:12, 13).

D. Cries of Anger (v. 10a)

10a. But the whole assembly talked about stoning them.

One would hope that the Israelites would take heart from Joshua and Caleb's challenging words. Their response, however, is the very opposite; they prepare to stone the two men. The nation's contempt for the faithful men's message is so great that they would rather silence the messengers than listen any longer. But the people's real offense is committed against the Lord.

Conclusion

A. Words Printed in Yellow

Some Bibles print Jesus' words in red so that they stand out to the reader. Perhaps today's lesson text should be printed in yellow, a cautionary signal. The Israelites rebelled against God and his chosen leaders, refusing to trust that the Lord would lead them into the promised land. When Paul recounts the examples of the Israelites' disobedience, he emphasizes that these incidents are not just ancient history: "These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us" (1 Corinthians 10:11).

We can easily read an account like the one in today's text, shake our heads, and wonder how the Israelites could have forgotten so quickly all that the Lord had done for them. Instead of becoming haughty, reading today's account should humble us (see 1 Corinthians 10:12). We can learn much from the Israelites' negative examples. We should not treat their failures lightly as we journey toward our own "promised land."

B. Prayer

Father, examine, convict, and strengthen us so that we do not become guilty of faithlessness. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

In the midst of unfaithfulness,
God remains faithful.¹