

Tragedy . . . Missed Opportunity

Numbers 14; Deuteronomy 1

Introduction

There are certain sermons that are very enjoyable to preach. They are the sermons that we have all had delivered to us that are not really very convicting. They deal with issues of which we have already given control to the Lord.

Today, however, we come to the kind of sermon that is very difficult to deliver because I know it will knock at the door of all of our hearts. I hope, by God's Spirit, that it will indeed, challenge our hearts. It deals with something that I believe we all face, and that is, the potential to miss opportunities for the cause of Jesus Christ.

The Spies Are Sent to Survey the Land

Turn in your Bible to the book of Numbers, chapter 13, and we will begin our discussion where we left off in our last session. In chapter 13, the Israelites are on the border of the promised land. Look at verses 1 through 3.

Then the Lord spoke to Moses saying, "Send out for yourself men so that they may spy out the land of Canaan, which I am going to give to the sons of Israel; you shall send a man from each of their fathers' tribes, every one a leader among them." So Moses sent them from the wilderness of Paran at the command of the Lord, all of them men who were heads of the sons of Israel.

These were the leaders in Israel. We know, from the book of Deuteronomy that we will look at in a moment, that these leaders were not going to spy out the land to see whether they could take it, but rather, to determine the best route on which to take several million people in to possess the land. Where were the wells? Where were the fruit trees? What would be the best route to take? Look at verses 18 through 21a of chapter 13.

See what the land is like, and whether the people who live in it are strong or weak, whether they are few or many. How is the land in which they live, is it good [fertile] or

bad? And how are the cities in which they live, are they like open camps or with fortifications? How is the land, is it fat or lean? Are there trees in it or not? Make an effort then to get some of the fruit of the land. Now the time was the time of the first ripe grapes [mid-July]. So they went up and spied out the land . . .

Moses tells the spies to get some of the fruit of the land because he knew the people would need encouragement.

It is interesting that in the next few verses, their survey focuses on Hebron. Look at verses 21 and 22.

So they went up and spied out the land from the wilderness of Zin as far as Rehob, at Lebo-hamath. When they had gone up into the Negev, they came to Hebron where Ahiman, Sheshai and Talmai, the descendants of Anak were. (Now Hebron was built seven years before Zoan in Egypt.)

Now, "Anak" is the Hebrew word that means "long neck". It is from this word that we get the idea that these were tall people.

Continue to verse 23.

Then they came to the valley of Eshcol and from there cut down a branch with a single cluster of grapes; and they carried it on a pole between two men . . .

"The valley of Eshcol" is literally "the valley of the cluster" or "the valley of the grape". This was in the vicinity of Hebron. Note that a single cluster of grapes had to be carried on a pole between two men! Imagine what size this cluster must have been. These men cut down one single cluster and yet, they needed to create a frame and carry it on the shoulders of two of them. It was fertile land.

Look at verse 24.

That place was called the valley of Eshcol, because of the cluster which the sons of Israel cut down from there.

It is interesting that on taxi cabs and on many industries in Israel today, one of the signs that is very

prevalent is the sign of a cluster of grapes. They are in the promised land.

By the way, the promised land today is modern Israel, Lebanon, and southern Syria. If you have ever wondered why they fight for Lebanon, it is because they consider it theirs; it was part of the promised territory.

The spies survey focused on Hebron

I think it is significant that God has their survey center on the land of Hebron. Let me give three reasons why.

1. It was in Hebron that God first promised Abraham, “The land is yours.”

It was in Hebron where Abraham first heard the promise of God, as recorded in Genesis, chapter 15. God said, “I will give you this land; this will be for your inhabitants. And I will give you a people that will number more than the stars in the heavens or the sands on the seashore.”

It was in Hebron where their survey begins.

2. Secondly, it was in Hebron where Abraham leaves, at one point, to take on the kings who had abducted Lot.

Abraham, with a rag-tag bunch of servants, took on kings of nations. God’s power honored their faith and they overcame those kings. You can see how Hebron represents the honoring of God for great faith.

3. Thirdly, Hebron was the area in which Abraham purchased a cave – the cave of Machpelah – where he buried his wife.

It was in that cave that Abraham, himself, would be buried. It is in Hebron, in fact, that Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, and Rebekah are buried.

So, if you were starting out on a trip and you knew your faith needed bolstering, what greater place to go than to Hebron? There you see so many manifestations of God’s promise that, “If you will obey Me, I will show My strength on your behalf.”

So, He takes them to a place where their faith, in a sense, could be revitalized.

Ladies and gentlemen, we talked briefly in our last discussion, about that place where you go to view things that God has done in your life. Do you have a place and a memory that every time you travel back there, it revitalizes and strengthens your faith because it was the place that God did something for you?

All of us, I trust, can begin at the place of new birth; of salvation, when we received the gift of eternal life. I previously shared with you an experience that I had which I had been looking forward to for a long time. My family, while I was growing up, lived in one home. They moved when I went to college. So, for eighteen or nineteen years, we lived in one home on Redbrook Lane. I had such a desire to go back, so a year ago, I decided it was time and one of my brothers and I went.

We knocked on the door of that home and a gal came to the door carrying a baby. I said, “Ma’am, I was raised in this house and I’d just like to see it again.”

She said, “Far out.”

I thought, “Well, that’s good, I guess.”

I was far out when I lived there!

So, we went in and went through that whole house. We went down to the basement and they had ruined the perfect play room. It had had a tile floor that was perfect for roller skating or ping pong or whatever. They had divided it and put in carpet. We went to a room that had been added by my father’s own skill, as a small bedroom for my youngest brother. That had also been changed. We then went into the living room. This tour was doing so much for me.

There was one room though, that I really wanted to see. Finally, I separated myself from my brother and the gal, who were talking about the house. I climbed the stairs, which now seemed so tiny, turned left and went into a little room that was about ten by seven feet. That was my bedroom when my brother went to college – I finally had my own. I walked into that room and my eyes were riveted to one particular place where my bed used to be. I went and stood on that spot. If you have been in this position, then you know how I felt. I remembered, one night about twelve years ago, climbing out of my bed and kneeling on that spot, and saying, “Lord Jesus, my life is Yours.”

I left that house ready to conquer because I had seen a place where I knew God had manifested Himself to me; a place where I had surrendered to Him in obedience. That revitalized me like nothing else.

I believe God is taking these Israelites to the very place where His strength is shouting, “*I’m available, if you will obey Me.*”

The Spies Return and Report

The spies returned home and, as you may remember, their report is negative. Look at verses 25 and 26 of Numbers, chapter 13.

When they returned from spying out the land, at the end of forty days, they proceeded to come to Moses and Aaron and to all the congregation of the sons of Israel in the wilderness of Paran, at Kadesh; and they brought back word to them and to all the congregation and showed them the fruit of the land.

I would imagine the people buzzed with excitement when they saw that cluster of grapes, especially since they had just left the desert. Continue to verse 27.

Thus they told him, and said, “We went in to the land where you sent us; and it certainly does flow with milk and honey, and this is its fruit.”

The negative report

Verse 28 then begins with the word,

“Nevertheless, . . .”

In other words, “*But . . .*”, and the spies will proceed to give a negative report.

I had to ask the question, “Why?” I struggled with this and would like to suggest at least three reasons.

1. First, I think perhaps they thought the project was just too big; too much; too difficult.

Look at verse 28.

Nevertheless, the people who live in the land are strong, . . .

What are these people compared to God? Continue to verse 28b.

. . . and the cities are fortified and very large . . .

This implies that these people are a warring people and that they have been at war and have instruments of war. They do not have open camps and are not free to roam as they please, but are at war with other fortified cities. Look at the last phrase of verse 28.

. . . moreover, we saw the descendants of Anak there.

In other words, “We saw the long-necks; we saw these people that were *so* tall.”

Later, they will say, “We felt like grasshoppers in their presence.”

2. Secondly, they not only thought the project was too great, but perhaps they had a fear of the unknown; a difficulty in seeing beyond.

Look at verse 29.

Amalek is living in the land of the Negev and the Hittites and the Jebusites and the Amorites are living in the hill country, and the Canaanites are living by the sea and by the side of the Jordan.

“This is *too much* for us. Besides, all of these people surrounding us – we don’t know who they are; we only know names – they’re powerful, fighting people, while we are formerly slaves. What will we fight them with, our hoes?”

In the Christian community, ladies and gentlemen, we consider someone insightful and wise if they can see the problems. However, anyone can see the problems. It is the insightful person who can provide the solutions. It does not take anything to see what is wrong with the world; what is wrong with the cause of Jesus Christ, but it takes great insight to see the problems, the obstacles and, instead of saying, “Woe is me,” saying, “God is strong! And here are the solutions.”

You have probably heard of Henry Ford, who ran an assembly line of his automobiles in Detroit. I love the story that occurred one day, as the assembly line was buzzing. A large machine that controlled much of the plant, broke down. The engineers, who worked for Ford, were unable to fix it. The assembly line was completely shut down and it was at no small cost to Ford. So finally, Ford wired the engineer who created the machine and said, “Please come.”

The engineer came as quickly as he could. He walked over to the machine and, in a matter of a few moments, the machine was up and running. A few weeks later, Ford received a bill for \$10,000. Ford was incensed. He wrote the engineer and said something like, “Ten thousand dollars for pushing a few buttons?”

A week or so later, Ford received a detailed response from the engineer. The following invoice was given:

- for pushing a few buttons, \$100;

- for knowing which buttons to push, \$9,900.

It is of great value for us, men and women, not to just see obstacles. It is of great value in this church, in this community, for the cause of Jesus Christ, and in our own personal lives to ask God for the insight and the wisdom to see the way through.

Ten Israelite spies went into the promised land. Eight of them saw barriers; eight of them saw obstacles; eight of them saw walled cities, and their faith crumbled. However, two of them saw God. In their eyes of faith, they saw the walled cities crumble.

I think there are many people in the church who fear the unknown. Perhaps today, a young person has heard the whisper of God saying, “I want you to give Me your life and I want you to give it to Me completely.”

Perhaps you respond by saying, “No,” because of the fear of the unknown; the fear of what God might do with your life.

I think there are businessmen and women who have felt the nudge of God’s Spirit saying, “Make My name known here.”

They say, “No,” because they fear the unknown.

How will you respond? Do you have a fear of the unknown?

3. Thirdly, let me suggest that their negative report was fueled by unrealistic expectations.

Look at verses 31 and 32.

But the men who had gone up with him said, “We are not able to go up against the people, for they are too strong for us.” So they gave out to the sons of Israel a bad [false] report of the land which they had spied out, saying, “The land through which we have gone, in spying it out, is a land that devours its inhabitants; and all the people whom we saw in it are men of great size.”

Now they are exaggerating, aren’t they? Continue to verse 33.

There also we saw the Nephilim (the sons of Anak are part of the Nephilim); and we became like grasshoppers in our own sight, and so we were in their sight.

Let us get T-shirts and put on our new motto, “Grasshoppers for God”. That is who they were saying they were.

What did they think they were going to do? What had God told them earlier? He had said, “Go up and possess the land. Fight the sons of Anak and I will give you possession.”

Did they think they would lollygag into the land of Canaan and the Canaanites and the sons of Anak would look at them and say, “Oh, so you’re the sons of Israel. We’ve heard about you. Well, come right on in. Here, have my home and take my cattle.”

Now, lest you misunderstand and think that God is a very unjust God, you need to understand that the Canaanites are under the indictment of God because they are child sacrificers. They have, by their own choice, rejected the Israelites’ Yahweh. And God of the Old Testament does not wait until the great white throne, but judges often and immediately. So, when the Israelites go in and possess the land, they go in the name of Yahweh and will defeat and bring into judgement, literally, those that have denied Yahweh and sacrificed to false gods.

The leaders failed the “leadership” test

So, the spies failed. Let me give two reasons why they failed the leadership test. Let us try to bring some things out of this for those who lead. Many of you do, whether it is in your home, community, or church.

1. First, they failed because they assumed a position that did not belong to them.

God did not send them into the land and say, “Okay, you go look at the land and come back, and then, we’ll take a vote.”

That was not the reason they went. They were to go and take note of the route which would be best to capacitate millions of Jews who were to enter the land. They were to come back and say, “Here’s the way we are to go.”

Deuteronomy, chapter 1, verse 22, says, “Go and look into . . .”

. . . the way by which we should go . . .

It was not up for a vote.

With those who lead, there are certain things that are givens and are not up for votes. It is the responsibility of the leader to take people, where they are, to the place where they should be.

The people were in Kadesh-barnea. The leaders were to take the people to the promised land – period.

However, the leaders put a question mark where God had placed a period.

2. Secondly, not only did the leaders assume a role that belonged only to God, they failed to provide a godly influence as well.

The leaders were fearful, so what happened to the people? What happens when those in leadership are fearful? The people become fearful. The leaders became intimidated, so the people became intimidated. The leaders raised their voice in opposition to the command of God and rebelled. So what did the people do? They did the very same thing.

Instead of influencing the people in a godly manner, the leaders influenced them in a negative way. And the people, as a result of following the leaders, would die in the wilderness.

The positive report

Now, there is also a positive report.

1. First, Caleb responds with courage.

I love verse 30 of Numbers, chapter 13.

Then Caleb quieted the people before Moses and said, “We should by all means go up and take possession of it, for we shall surely overcome it.”

The crowd looks at Caleb and probably jeers – in fact, they rebel.

2. Secondly, Joshua and Caleb challenge the people.

Look at verses 6 through 9 of chapter 14.

Joshua the son of Nun and Caleb the son of Jephunneh, of those who had spied out the land, tore their clothes; and they spoke to all the congregation of the sons of Israel, saying, “The land which we passed through to spy out is an exceedingly good land. If the Lord is pleased with us, then He will bring us into this land and give it to us – a land which flows with milk and honey. Only do not rebel against the Lord; and do not fear the people of the land, for they will be our prey. Their protection has been removed from them, and the Lord is with us; do not fear them.”

Ten spies went out – eight saw giants; two saw God. Unfortunately, however, two was a minority.

Israel Responds to the Spies Report

Now notice the response of the people. Turn to Deuteronomy, chapter 1. Let me give three things the Israelites do in response to the report of the spies.

1. First, they became discouraged because of the present circumstances.

Look at verse 28 of Deuteronomy, chapter 1.

Where can we go up? Our brethren have made our hearts melt, saying, “The people are bigger and taller than we; the cities are large and fortified to heaven. And besides, we saw the sons of the Anakim there.”

“There are tall, long-necked giants.”

The people became discouraged because of the present.

2. Secondly, the Israelites completely ignore the past.

Look at verses 29 through 31. Moses is recounting in this verse, by the way. You should underline these words in your text.

Then I said to you, “Do not be shocked, nor fear them. The Lord your God who goes before you will Himself fight on your behalf, just as He did for you in Egypt before your eyes, and in the wilderness where you saw how the Lord your God carried you, just as a man carries his son, in all the way which you have walked, until you came to this place.”

In other words, “Have you forgotten the past and all that God has done for you? Have you forgotten the power which He revealed to the greatest nation on planet earth – the nation Egypt?”

3. Thirdly, they rebel against God’s promise.

Look at verse 32.

But for all this, you did not trust the Lord your God, who goes before you on your way, to seek out a place for you to encamp, in fire by night and cloud by day, to show you the way in which you should go.

God Responds to the Israelites’ Disobedience

Now, let me give three things that God does in response to the Israelites’ disobedience.

1. First, the adults will not enter the promised land.

Look at verses 34 and 35 of Deuteronomy, chapter 1.

Then the Lord heard the sound of your words, and He was angry and took an oath, saying, “Not one of these men, this evil generation, shall see the good land which I swore to give your fathers,

Numbers, chapter 14, verses 29 and 30, gives us a little more of an account, in saying,

. . . all . . . from twenty years old and upward . . . shall not come into the land in which I swore to settle you . . .

In fact, in verse 29 of Numbers, chapter 14, God tells the people,

your corpses will fall in this wilderness . . .

In other words, God is saying, “You went into the land to spy it out for forty days; I’m going to make you travel in the wilderness for forty years. That is one year for every day that you spent in the promised land and ignored My faithfulness and My power.”

I want to give a principle from this. Principle number one:

Disobedience causes us to forfeit the best that God has for us.

Ladies and gentlemen, I am convinced that it is possible for me to miss an opportunity that God has for me by disobedience. I believe that God’s power and His faithfulness are sovereign, but through disobedience, I can limit the manifestation of God’s power in my life.

2. Secondly, God says that Caleb and Joshua will be allowed to enter the promised land.

Look at verses 36 through 38 of Deuteronomy, chapter 1.

“except Caleb the son of Jephunneh; he shall see it, and to him and to his sons I will give the land on which he has set foot, because he has followed the Lord fully.” The Lord was angry with me [Moses] also on your account, saying, “Not even you shall enter there. Joshua the son of Nun, who stands before you, he shall enter there; encourage him, for he shall cause Israel to inherit it.”

Let me give a second principle that is the reverse of the first. Principle number two:

Obedience causes us to receive the best that God has for us.

Picture in your mind, millions of men that God had prepared to soar like eagles in the promised land that now, will be condemned to wander in the wilderness for forty years until they are all dead. They were standing on the border at Kadesh-barnea and could look over and see the land that God had promised. Why did they forfeit that? Because they would not obey. They said, in effect, “God, we all know what’s out in the future and we can’t trust You that far. Besides, following You would mean relief from obstacles, wouldn’t it? Yet, it seems that there are more. We’ll stay in the desert.”

There are believers who have reached that same decision today. They say, “It is easier to take the reigns in my life. I’ve got salvation; I’m going to heaven, but that’s about it. It’s too painful to enter the promised land.”

This, by the way, is anti-typed in the New Testament as the believer who enters the rest in Jesus Christ. It is not heaven, but is receiving fully what God has promised to those of us who trust God in Christ.

Let me ask a question for you to think about. Are you reveling in, understanding, and living in light of what is yours in Jesus Christ? Or, is there something hidden, something that only you know, that is blocking? Is there something that would cause you to say, “I’ll have to deal with that or change that or surrender, and I don’t want that. Leave me out here in Kadesh-barnea.”

3. Thirdly, the children will be allowed to enter the promised land.

This is painful, but positive. Look at verse 39 of Deuteronomy, chapter 1.

Moreover, your little ones who you said would become a prey, . . .

(that is, you used them as an excuse),

. . . and your sons, who this day have no knowledge of good or evil, shall enter there, and I will give it to them and they shall possess it.

Let me give another principle. Principle number three:

Disobedience always brings sorrow.

Do you know what this verse means? It means that every child is going to lose a mom and a dad. Instead of enjoying the promised land with their families, they would have to watch in sorrow. Someone calculated that for this to happen, they had to bury over a thousand Israelites every day. That is sorrow.

This brings up an important point, ladies and gentlemen. Every time you and I are disobedient to God, we bring sorrow to someone else – not just to ourselves. Any time we fail to surrender to Jesus Christ, we bring sorrow to the body because of our disobedience; we bring sorrow to our families and to those that we lead.

Every young person who rebels brings sorrow not only to their own life, but to their parents and siblings as well. Every husband who rebels against God brings sorrow into the life of his wife and children. Every wife who disobeys God and rebels in her heart, brings sorrow to her husband and children.

You are not an island. When you and I decide we are going to live our lives for ourselves, we hurt *so* many people.

I did not realize just what this would mean. I have my parents, who are still living and have not gone through that valley the many of you have gone through.

The principle of responsibility to others was best illustrated, I think, by one of my coaches in high school. He had the audacity to develop a scheme in which he used peer pressure for himself. It was mean of him! He decided that if any of us, in that particular gym class, left a locker dirty or disheveled, the entire class would get a hack. Do you know what a hack is? If you do not, you are spoiled! He would line us up at the door and would give us a hack, or a pop, as we would go out the door, and then, we would run a lap.

I can remember – it happened to me one time. I learned a lesson – if I am disobedient to him, I am going to create discomfort for every member of my class. We kept it clean.

Now, magnify that by a million. That is the principle of responsibility that we have to those around us to obey God.

Israel Reacts to God's Decision

Note the reaction of the Israelites to God's response. Let me give two points about their reaction.

1. First, the Israelites display insincere repentance.

Notice verse 41a of Deuteronomy, chapter 1.

Then you said to me, "We have sinned against the Lord; . . ."

This is actually insincere because of what they are going to do. They were sorry they had gotten caught. They were sorry that the grapes would not be theirs tomorrow.

2. Secondly, the Israelites act with stubborn presumption.

Look at verses 41b through 43.

“. . . we will indeed go up and fight, just as the Lord our God commanded us.” And every man of you girded on his weapons of war, and regarded it as easy to go up into the hill country. And the Lord said to me, "Say to them, 'Do not go up nor fight, for I am not among you; otherwise you will be defeated before your enemies.'" So I spoke to you, but you would not listen. Instead you . . .

(Repented? No.),

. . . rebelled against the command of the Lord, and acted presumptuously and went up into the hill country.

Numbers, chapter 14, verse 44b, tells us that,

. . . neither the ark of the covenant of the Lord nor Moses left the camp.

So, look at the result of the Israelites' presumption, in verses 44 and 45 of Deuteronomy, chapter 1.

The Amorites who lived in that hill country came out against you and chased you as bees do, and crushed you from Seir to Hormah. Then you returned and wept before the Lord; but the Lord did not listen to your voice nor give ear to you.

Application

Let me give a principle that leads to an application for us today.

Delayed obedience is disobedience.

Yesterday the Israelites would not go in and conquer; today they said, "We will."

The unique thing about their delayed obedience though, is that now they are going to take the enemy

on by themselves. They thought, “Well, God told us we can’t have the land, but huh, who is God? Get your shovel and your pick and let’s go take on these people.”

It was presumption.

I think the saddest words are the words in verse 40 of Deuteronomy, chapter 1, and verse 1 of Deuteronomy, chapter 2. Let us read them.

[God says] But as for you, turn around and set out for the wilderness by the way to the Red Sea.

Then we turned and set out for the wilderness by the way to the Red Sea, as the Lord spoke . . .

These are perhaps, the most tragic words written about the Israelites to this point. God, because of their disobedience, turned them away from the promised land and said, “Go to the wilderness.”

The Israelites stubbornly tried to fight against God’s command and take on the enemy by themselves, and God allowed them to be crushed. They would face the judgement of God and for forty years, wander in this strange way, all through the wilderness, until the last Israelite that had rebelled against God, died.

You can write across the Israelites’ lives, two phrases that I fear could be written on my life and on the lives of all who are hearing this today. The words, as a result of disobedient lives to God, are: “wasted lives” . . . “missed opportunities”.

Paul writes to the Galatians, in chapter 5, verse 7, a challenging statement. He said this to them as they were thinking of going back into Judaism; of refusing the freedom that they had in Jesus Christ; of refusing to surrender to Him,

You were running well; who hindered you from obeying the truth?

You were running so well, what stopped you; what brought everything to a screeching halt? What hindered you from obeying the truth?