

## Accept God's Guidance

February 15, 2009

Purpose: To help us accept God's guidance with boldness in order that we may receive God's promised blessings

Key Bible reference: Numbers 13-14

Key Verse: Numbers 14.8-9

Biblical Background: All of us know what it is like to be afraid. Being afraid makes us feel weak and ashamed; and whether our fears are realistic or not, fear can paralyze us. So we can well understand Israel's fear of the Canaanites, with their powerful armies and walled cities. We can understand how that fear could have brought the people to the point of turning back toward Egypt and slavery.

Numbers 13:1-16. At last, the people of Israel have arrived at the border of the Promised Land. The Lord directs Moses to select twelve spies, one from each tribe, to spy out the land of Canaan. Two of these spies will play a particularly important role in the events that follow. Caleb son of Jephunneh [ji-FUHN-uh] comes from the chief southern tribe, Judah. From the chief northern tribe, Ephraim [EE-fray-im], comes Hoshea [hohSHEE-uh] son of Nun, whose name was changed by Moses himself to Joshua. As we already saw in the E tradition of the golden calf, Joshua was a hero of the north. But it is the southern hero Caleb who plays the major role in the J tradition of the spies.

Verses 17-24. Moses sends the spies into the land with very specific instructions. They are to assess the character of the land (how much is wooded and how much is open plain, whether the land is rich) and the military strength of its people (are they weak or strong; do they live in walled cities). The spies are not to decide whether the conquest should go forward; that is left to the Lord. Notice that while Numbers 13:21 reports that the land the spies reconnoitered extended "from the wilderness of Zin [in the southern desert] to Rehob [REE-hob], near Lebo-hamath [lee-boh-HAYmuhth]," far to the north, the places the spies actually visit are all in the southern territory of Judah (verses 22-24). In the old J story, it was the south that was spied out and found to be extremely rich and fruitful—so rich that it takes two spies to carry back one bunch of grapes from Wadi Eshcol [WAH-dee ESH-kol] (verses 23-24)! By including verse 21, the priestly editors keep this a story about the whole land, north as well as south.

Verses 25-33. These verses are a combination of J and P traditions. The spies return and report that while the land is very rich indeed, the people are very strong. Caleb, however, urges that the strength of the inhabitants should not discourage the people from claiming the Lord's promised land: "Let us go up at once and occupy it, for we are well able to overcome it" (verse 30). The other spies, however, reject Caleb's word. The Anakites [AN-uh-kites] are there, these spies say, a people famous for their height. What is more, the spies claim that the Anakites are not just tall people but giants—supernatural monsters related to the Nephilim [NEF-uhlim]. The Nephilim were the monstrous children resulting from sexual relations between human women and the "sons of the gods" in the world before the Flood (Genesis 6:4). In the face of such enemies, the spies report, "to ourselves we seemed like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them" (Numbers 13:33).

Numbers 14:1-10. In this predominantly P text, the theme of Israel's murmuring is sounded once more. The Israelites say, "Our wives and our little ones will become booty; would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?" (verse 3). But this time they go further in rebellion than they have before, even so far as plotting to choose a new leader who will replace Moses and take them back to Egypt (verse 4). Moses and Aaron, overwhelmed by this treachery, fall on their faces before the assembly.

Now, for the first time, Joshua comes on the scene. The old J text had mentioned only Caleb, the loyal spy from Judah. But P recalls the involvement of Joshua, the northern hero from the tribe of Ephraim. Joshua joins Caleb in urging the people to risk the assault on Canaan. The two spies remind the people of the land's richness, "a land that flows with milk and honey" (verse 8). Further, they insist that with the Lord's aid, Canaan's military might will be overthrown: "Only do not rebel against the Lord; and do not fear the people of the land, for they are no more than bread for us; their protection is removed from them, and the Lord is with us; do not fear them" (verse 9). The people of Israel respond to this passionate appeal by threatening to stone the two loyal spies. So the Lord intervenes directly, appearing in the glory at the tent of meeting.

Verses 11-25. In the E story of the golden calf, the Lord decided to destroy Israel and start over with Moses' descendants (Exodus 32:10). In this J story, a similar decision is connected to the people's rebellion at the very borders of Canaan (Numbers 14:11-12). But, here as there, Moses argues that this cannot be, for the sake of the Lord's own honor: "Now if you kill this people all at one time, then the nations who have heard about you will say, 'It is because the Lord was not able to bring this people into the land he swore to give them that he has slaughtered them in the wilderness'" (verses 15-16). Then Moses recalls the words the Lord had spoken when the tablets of the Law were given (Numbers 14:18; compare Exodus 34:6-7): The LORD is slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression, but by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children to the third and the fourth generation.

Moses appeals to the steadfast love of God, asking that the people be forgiven this time, as they have been forgiven before. As in the golden calf incident, the Lord agrees to forgive Israel—but not without a terrible cost. An entire generation is condemned to die in the wilderness without ever entering the Promised Land. The land will instead be given to their children and grandchildren. The only exception the Lord allows is "my servant Caleb, because he has a different spirit and has followed me wholeheartedly" (Numbers 14:24; Joshua is not mentioned, as he was not part of the old J story). The Lord then directs the Israelites to head directly back into the wilderness toward Yam Suph, "since the Amalekites and the Canaanites live in the valleys" (verse 25). These peoples are now a threat to Israel because God has withdrawn protection. God will not give Israel victory over their enemies this time. The people must flee back into the wastes.

Verses 26-38. The priestly editors now add their tradition of the Lord's response (notice that the Lord addresses both Moses and Aaron and that the people's complaining—a characteristic P theme—is again recalled). The Lord declares that every Israelite "included in the census, from twenty years old and upward" (verse 29) will die in the wilderness—with the exception of Caleb and Joshua (verse 30). The census referred to here begins the Book of Numbers (Numbers 1:1-47) and lists all capable of bearing arms who had come out of Egypt. Indeed, the name of the book, Numbers, comes from this census and from another in Numbers 26. These censuses were preserved by the priestly editors, who were interested in genealogies and statistics.

To insure that no one over the age of twenty lives to enter the land, the people are condemned to wander in the wilderness one year for every day that the spies wandered the land: forty years, or an entire generation (Numbers 14:34). Ironically, the children whom the Israelites had feared would become booty will themselves be the conquerors of "the land that you have despised" (verse 31). Finally, the Lord kills the faithless spies with a plague; only Joshua and Caleb survive (verses 36-38).

The Israelites had evidently expected the Promised Land to be theirs without effort or risk. Some of God's blessings do come to us with little effort on our part. For example, the beauty of the world is ours if we have the gift of observing and appreciating it. But most of God's blessings are opportunities to be claimed through labor, dedication, and willingness to take risks.

Prayer: God of change and glory, God of time and space, when we fear the future, give to us your grace. In the midst of changing ways give us still the grace to praise. In Jesus' name. Amen.

## **Credits**

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