

Lesson 5 | September 29, 2024

Leaders Who Rebelled against God

Study Text: Numbers 13:1 through 14:45

Central Truth: Israel's rebellion reminds us that God will punish sin.

Key Verse: Numbers 14:11

The Lord said unto Moses, How long will this people provoke me? and how long will it be ere they believe me, for all the signs which I have showed among them? (KJV)

The Lord said to Moses, "How long will these people treat me with contempt? Will they never believe me, even after all the miraculous signs I have done among them?" (NLT)

Learning Objectives

- Students will understand what makes the difference between responding in faith and faithlessness.
- Students will sense how great the cost of faithlessness can be.
- Students will choose to act in faith-filled obedience to God when confronted by challenging circumstances.

Introducing the Lesson

Say: Israel faced a test as they were about to enter the Promised Land. Sadly, it became one of their worst failures. The events that took place after Moses sent twelve spies into Canaan serve as a warning to all people about the danger of losing faith. It all started when ten leaders gave in to fear.

Discussion Starter—What Do You Believe?

Pick one person to tell three things about themselves in front of the group. Two things should be true, and one thing should be false. Have the group vote on which of the three statements was false.

Say: In many ways, this activity was like the challenge that Israel faced when the spies returned from the Promised Land. They had to decide who or what they were going to believe between the different reports they heard.

Numbers 13 and 14 tell the sad story of the Israelite leaders who spied out the Promised Land. The people had reached the big moment. Everything they had been hoping for was right in front of them. They could even see the land God promised them. But there was one more decision to make before they could enter. The results of that decision are still talked about today. What a warning for anyone who might be struggling to obey God!

Part 1—Intimidated by Giants

What the People Should Have Heard

Numbers 13:1–3, 25–27

Say: Can you imagine what the Israelites were feeling when the spies returned from exploring the Promised Land? They must have been excited to hear eyewitness accounts of how great the land was. And sure enough, the report began with good news (Numbers 13:25–27). The land was even better than they had hoped.

God’s plan that started with a promise to Abraham was about to be fulfilled. The nation of Israel had set up camp at the southern border of Canaan, their new home. God told Moses to gather twelve leaders to carefully explore the land (Numbers 13:1–3). These were no ordinary men, but mature leaders. One of the men, Caleb, later said he was forty years old when he was sent on this mission (Joshua 14:7). Along with their families, these leaders had witnessed the miracles in Egypt, the crossing of the Red Sea, and the giving of the Law at Sinai. At this pivotal moment, God wanted the whole nation to be filled with confidence. He had made them a promise He was powerful enough to fulfill.

Moses commissioned the men with simple instructions for exploring the land (Numbers 13:17–20). He gave them a list of questions to answer and told them to bring back some produce from the land. At the center of his instructions was the single summary question: “Is it good or bad?” Neither God nor Moses asked the leaders to give their opinion on how hard it would be to take the land. Instead, this mission was to remind Israel of the goodness of God’s promises.

They explored the entire land, starting at the southern border and traveling to the northern border at Lebo-hamath (*LEE-boh HAY-math*; verse 21). Moses and the people waited more than a month for their report. When they returned, everyone gathered to hear the news and see the grapes, figs, and pomegranates they carried (verse 26).

They brought good news at first. Using the language of their time and culture, the spies described an incredibly fruitful land “flowing with milk and honey” (verse 27). It was everything they had hoped for. If the report had ended there, the Israelites would have been spared much suffering. Sadly, the spies overstepped their mission and began to talk about how impossible it would be to conquer the land.

We can be guilty of the same thing. Rather than listening to the good report God has prepared for us, we often focus on the limitations of our own abilities. But living in faith and obedience means listening to what God is saying, not trying to figure out whether we are strong enough or smart enough to make it happen ourselves. God never intended the Israelites to make His plan happen on their own. He often doesn’t expect us to either.

Resource Packet Item 1: Guarding the Heart from Unbelief

Psalm 95 refers to the Israelites' grumbling about the lack of water at Massah and Meribah (Exodus 17:1–7). The Psalmist explains that praise is the antidote to this kind of faithlessness and hardness of heart. Students will follow a series of prompts to record their own words of praise as a guard against unbelief.

Discuss

- What good promises has God made to us? How often do you remind yourself of these promises?
- Why do people find it difficult to trust that God will keep His promises? Why is it easier to focus on difficulties and trials instead?

What the People Actually Heard

Numbers 13:28–33

Say: Rather than inspiring the people to trust God to keep His promises, most of the Israelite spies shared a message of fear and doubt. These leaders should have known the importance of encouraging faith and obedience, but ten of them chose to create panic instead.

After reporting that the land was fruitful, all but two of the spies changed direction. It was as though the messengers said, "Forget everything we just told you about the land. This next part is what really matters." Unfortunately, the next part was full of fear. It exalted their enemies and minimized the power of God.

The spies reported seeing large cities with walls that protected them from attacks. Since leaving Egypt, Israel had only encountered nomadic tribes, so this kind of fortified defense would have been different for them to engage. Their dreams of the Promised Land had almost certainly never included scaling city walls.

The more the spies reported, the worse the situation sounded. They had already told the nation to forget the good things about the land, but now they made it even worse, shaping their words to increase the people's fear. Essentially, they said, "The land is great, but forget about that. The cities will be impossible to conquer. And we haven't even told you the worst part. . . . There are giants!"

By the time the Israelite spies finished their report, the people were terrified. Any hope of the Promised Land melted away. Caleb tried to calm the people and encourage them to take the land: "We can certainly conquer it!" (verse 30). But the ten spies who disagreed with him spread their fear and unbelief among the people. To them, it was not enough that God was on their side. They insisted the land would "devour anyone who goes to live there" (verse 32).

We also face obstacles every time we attempt to trust God and have faith in His promises. Like the Israelites, we must decide which report we will believe. Will we listen to other people's negativity and our own insecurity? Or will we trust God and walk in His promises?.

Discuss

- When was a time you heard a report that instilled fear instead of inspiring trust in God? How did you react?

Part 2—Failure to Trust God’s Promise

The Simplicity of Faith

Numbers 14:6–9

Say: While the other ten spies were afraid of the Israelites’ enemies, Joshua and Caleb were more concerned about the Israelites’ faithlessness. They tried one more time to convince the people to trust God.

The ten spies’ faithless report caused a night of tears throughout the nation of Israel. Caleb had tried to convince everyone that the situation was not hopeless. It quickly became clear that Israel was at a turning point. God had brought them out of Egypt more than a year before, but fear revealed their hearts were still in Egypt. The people started conspiring, “Let’s choose a new leader and go back to Egypt!” (Numbers 14:4).

Joshua and Caleb realized the situation was getting out of control, so they rushed to counter the faithlessness of their fellow spies (verse 6). It wasn’t anger they felt. It was deep sadness that the Israelites had already forgotten how powerful God was. Tearing their clothes in front of the people was an act that showed this sorrow. They knew the nation was about to cross a dangerous line into complete rebellion against God.

In their last rescue attempt, Joshua and Caleb made a powerful statement of faith. They never denied the walls around the cities or the giants who lived there. Instead, they shifted attention back to God. With God on their side, there was nothing that could defeat them. The antidote to fear was not their own strength but the favor of God.

At that time, every city believed they had a protector god who watched out for them. Canaanite cities called on gods named Baal, Molech, Asherah, and Dagon. When a city was attacked, the people believed whoever had the stronger protector god would win. Joshua and Caleb essentially explained that the cities in Canaan had no protector gods that could stand against them because Yahweh (the Lord) was with Israel (verse 9). God’s people could not lose. All they needed to do was trust God and obey His instructions.

Even today, the best way to confront faithlessness is to remind yourself that God is bigger than any challenge that is coming your way. Obstacles and enemies may be bigger than your own strength, but they are insignificant compared to God’s power and His love for you. Remind yourself that the outcome of every battle depends on His strength, not yours. You can trust Him.

Resource Packet Item 2: Remember God’s Promises

Joshua and Caleb tried to encourage the Israelites to have faith by reminding them of God's promises. Students will stir up their faith by examining a few biblical promises and putting them in their own words.

Discuss

- Think of the people who encourage you to trust God. Do they have more or less influence in your life than those who sow doubt and fear?
- What actions could you take to help others trust God rather than be overwhelmed by their fears?

The Sin of Faithlessness

Numbers 14:10–11

Say: Few people who have experienced the goodness of God purposely reject Him. The story of the Israelite spies reminds us that the sin of faithlessness begins with a heart that is focused on the wrong things. But it can end with complete rejection of God.

All this time, God seemed to be silently watching the scene unfold. After Joshua and Caleb poured out their final pleas to the people, the Israelites made their decision. Rather than exchanging their fear for trust in God, they took their faithlessness one step too far and plotted to murder the faithful spies (Numbers 14:10). This final act of rebellion sealed the fate of an entire generation of Israelites.

God acted. The cloud of His glory appeared at the tabernacle, much like it had settled between the Israelites and the Egyptian army at the crossing of the Red Sea (Exodus 14:19–20). God was again protecting His faithful people.

God's words to Moses revealed the seriousness of their faithlessness and disobedience (Numbers 14:11–12). Apparently, the people had come to the place of despising Him. Treating God with contempt was the opposite of living in relationship with Him. It was utter rejection. The people's unbelief had become a deliberate and willful decision—a vote of no confidence.

The progression of sin is clear in the story and throughout Scripture. It starts when God blesses people in big ways. In this midst of all these blessings, it is easy to begin to focus on the wrong things. This wrong focus gives room for fear to take root. When fear is indulged and faith grows weak, then doubt starts to take over. This is the moment of greatest danger. Because when doubt is acted upon, then sin can lead to the rejection of God. A simple way to show this cycle is: blessing, fear, doubt, sin, rejection of God.

Very few Christians ever set out to reject God. It is a slow process. One of the images the New Testament uses is the slow hardening of someone's heart, eventually choking out faith in God (Hebrews 3:12–19, Jude 5). We should each examine our hearts to see if this cycle is happening in our lives.

Discuss

- What are things that instill fear and doubt in your life today? Are they impacting your confidence in the Lord?
- What things can you do today to stop the progression toward doubt?

Part 3—Doomed to Die in the Wilderness

The People’s Unjust Judgment of God

Numbers 14:26–27

Say: When the Israelites grumbled against God, they were essentially passing judgment on Him. But their unrighteous judgment stood in direct contrast to God’s righteous judgment against their sin.

Israel grumbled against God, against His plans, and against His chosen leaders. In fact, throughout the Exodus and the journey in the wilderness, it was the Israelites’ primary sin. Grumbling is far more serious than many people think it is. It goes beyond a sour disposition or basic grumpiness. At its root, grumbling is sitting in judgment of God.

Even when the Israelites were grumbling about Moses or Aaron, the true object of their discontent was always God. The people of Israel looked at all God had done for them and all He planned for their future, and they decided it wasn’t good enough. They decided God wasn’t good enough. Grumbling was a self-absorbed response to their circumstances. It was an act of pride and rebellion against God. It was a violation of one of the most basic commands that would be given to the Israelites: “You must not test the Lord your God” (Deuteronomy 6:16).

Even in a different time and place with different kinds of obstacles, it can still be easy for us to sit in judgment of God. Like the Israelites, we may not condemn God by name, but we often forget His blessings and reject the leaders He has put over us. Israel learned the hard way that harboring this kind of attitude is the same as blaspheming God. It is an act of great injustice to forget all that God has already done and think that we know better than Him. It is a terrible thing for mere humans to sit in judgment of an all-knowing and all-powerful God.

Discuss

- Why is grumbling such a dangerous sin for the people of God?
- What are things that people regularly grumble about? How is this related to their view of God?

Resource Packet Item 3: Facing Your Giants

The best way to confront challenges is to remind ourselves that God is bigger than whatever we’re facing. Students will list their major challenges and prayerfully consider what their godly response should be. This handout would work best as a take-home page for personal reflection.

God's Just Judgment of the People

Numbers 14:28–37

Say: It's tough to talk about God's judgment. After all, we'd much rather think about His love and blessings. But this story is an important reminder for all of us. Sin is costly, and God always deals with sin.

God issued harsh, righteous, and merciful judgment on the Israelites. It is hard to do all of these things at once, but God can. Just look at the Cross. Foreshadowing Jesus' work of salvation, Moses interceded for the people when God was ready to destroy them all (Numbers 14:13–19).

It is easy to read this story and miss God's mercy. When the Israelites rejected God, He would have been perfectly justified in rejecting them. Instead, He limited His judgment—only destroying the guilty (verses 31–32, 35), placing a time limit on the effects of their sin (verse 34), and not immediately issuing a death penalty to all (verses 36–37). The people's own words determined the method of their punishment. They said it would be better for them to die in the wilderness than to battle the Canaanites, and that's how God judged them.

Disobedience and faithlessness always bring judgment, and judgment always exacts a price. But God is patient and merciful. "He does not want anyone to be destroyed, but wants everyone to repent" (2 Peter 3:9). Choose obedience today.

Discuss

- Why does God judge sin?
- How does talking about divine judgment make you feel? Why do you think you respond in this way?

What Is God Saying to Us?

Say: This story about the twelve Israelite spies is one of the most powerful reminders in Scripture that you can experience many miraculous blessings from God and still be led astray by fear, doubt, and rebellion. Let's not feed our fears and grumble against God. That kind of disobedience only leads to judgment. Instead, let's learn to trust God no matter what—even when His promises seem hard to believe.

Living It Out

Ministry in Action

- Make a list of the ways God has blessed you. Share at least one of these stories with someone else this week.
- If there are certain areas in your life where you're having trouble trusting and obeying God, ask Him to forgive your faithlessness and teach you to trust Him.
- Feed your faith by reading the Bible every day this week.

Daily Bible Readings

Monday:

Cain Disregards God.

Genesis 4:1–8

Tuesday:

Michal Despises David's Worship.

2 Samuel 6:14–23

Wednesday:

Zedekiah Profanes God's Word.

Jeremiah 36:20–25

Thursday:

An Evil Generation Seeks Signs.

Luke 11:29–32

Friday:

Ananias and Sapphira Lie to God.

Acts 5:1–11

Saturday:

A Church Tolerates Sexual Immorality.

1 Corinthians 5:1–7