

Defeat in the Face of Certain Victory

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[0 : 00] Well, we're going to turn to our Bible reading now for this morning, and if you've been here the last couple of weeks, then Paul Brennan has been preaching some excerpts from the book of Numbers, and we're reading today in Numbers chapter 13 and 14.

You'll find that in the Church Bibles on page 121, otherwise it's very near the beginning of your Bible, after the book of Leviticus and before Deuteronomy.

And we're right at the very heart of this book today, the great turning point, the great tragedy of God's people at Kadesh Barnea.

So we're going to read all of chapter 13 and 14. It's a long reading, but it will tell us the whole story. Number 13 in verse 1, the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, send men to spy out the land of Canaan, which I'm giving to the people of Israel.

From each tribe of their fathers you shall send out a man, everyone a chief among them. So Moses sent them from the wilderness of Paran, according to the command of the Lord, all of them men who were heads of the people of Israel.

[1 : 14] And these were their names. From the tribe of Reuben, Shamoah, the son of Zachur. From the tribe of Simeon, Shaphat, the son of Hore. From the tribe of Judah, Caleb, the son of Jephunneh.

From the tribe of Isaacar, Egal, the son of Joseph. From the tribe of Ephraim, Hoshea, the son of Nun. From the tribe of Benjamin, Palti, the son of Raphu. From the tribe of Zebulun, Gadiel, the son of Sodhi.

From the tribe of Joseph, that is, from the tribe of Manasseh, Gadhi, the son of Susi. From the tribe of Dan, Amiel, the son of Gemali. From the tribe of Asher, Sethur, the son of Michael.

From the tribe of Naphtali, Nachbi, the son of Vofsi. From the tribe of Gad, Gil, the son of Machi. These were the names of the men whom Moses sent to spy out the land.

And Moses called Hoshea, the son of Nun, Joshua. Moses sent them to spy out the land of Canaan and said to them, Go up into the Negev and go up into the hill country and see what the land is and whether the people who dwell in it are strong or weak, whether they are few or many, and whether the land they dwell in is good or bad, and whether the cities they dwell in are camps or strongholds, and whether the land is rich or poor, and whether there are trees in it or not.

[2 : 27] Be of good courage and bring some of the fruit of the land. Now the time was the season of the first ripe grapes. So they went up and spied out the land from the wilderness of Zin to Rehob, near Lebo Hamath.

They went up to the Negev and came to Hebron, Ahiman, Sheshai, and Talmi. The descendants of Anak were there. Hebron was built seven years before Zoan in Egypt.

And they came to the valley of Eshkol and cut down from there a branch with a single cluster of grapes. And they carried it on a pole between two of them. They also brought some pomegranates and figs.

That place was called the valley of Eshkol because the cluster that the people of Israel cut down from there. At the end of 40 days, they returned from spying out the land.

And they came to Moses and Aaron and to all the congregation of the people of Israel in the wilderness of Paran at Kadesh. They brought back word to them and all the congregation and showed them the fruit of the land.

[3 : 31] And they told them, We came to the land to which you sent us. It flows with milk and honey. And this is its fruit. However, the people who dwell in the land are strong.

And the cities are fortified and very large. And besides, we saw the descendants of Anak there. The Amalekites dwelled in the land of the Negev. The Hittites, the Jebusites, and the Amorites dwell in

the hill country.

And the Canaanites dwell by the sea and along the Jordan. But Caleb quieted the people before Moses and said, Let us go up at once and occupy it, for we are well able to overcome it.

Then the men who had gone up with him said, We are not able to go up against this people, for they are stronger than we are. So they brought to the people of Israel a bad report, saying, The land through which we have gone to spy it out is a land that devours its inhabitants.

And all the people that we saw in it are of a great height. And there we saw the Nephilim, the sons of Anak, who come from the Nephilim. And we seem to ourselves like grasshoppers.

[4 : 42] And so we seem to them. Then all the congregation raised a loud cry. And the people wept that night. And all the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron.

The whole congregation said to them, Would that we had died in the land of Egypt, or would that we had died in this wilderness. Why is the Lord bringing us into this land to fall by the sword?

Our wives and our little ones will become a prey. Would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?

And they said to one another, Let us choose a leader and go back to Egypt. Then Moses and Aaron fell on their faces before all the assembly of the congregation of the people of Israel.

And Joshua the son of Nun, and Caleb the son of Jephunneh, who were among those who had spied out the land, tore their clothes and said to all the congregation of the people of Israel, The land which we pass through to spy it out is an exceedingly good land.

If the Lord delights in us, he will bring us into this land and give it to us, a land that flows with milk and honey. Only do not rebel against the Lord, and do not fear the people of the land, for they are bred for us.

[6 : 02] Their protection is removed from them, and the Lord is with us. Do not fear them. Then all the congregation said to stone them with stones.

But the glory of the Lord appeared at the tent of the meeting to all the people of Israel. And the Lord said to Moses, How long will this people despise me?

And how long will they not believe in me, in spite of all the signs that I have done among them? I will strike them with the pestilence and disinherit them, and I will make of you a nation greater and mightier than they.

But Moses said to the Lord, Then the Egyptians will hear of it, for you brought up this people in your might from among them, and they will tell the inhabitants of this land, they have heard that you, O Lord, are in the midst of this people.

For you, O Lord, are seen face to face, and your cloud stands over them, and you go before them in a pillar of cloud by day, and in a pillar of fire by night. Now if you kill this people as one man, then the nations who have heard your fame will say, it's because the Lord was not able to bring this people into the land that he swore to give them, that he has killed them in the wilderness.

[7 : 25] And now please, let the power of the Lord be great as you have promised, saying the Lord is slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression.

But he will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation. Please, pardon the iniquity of this people according to the greatness of your steadfast love, just as you have forgiven this people from Egypt until now.

Then the Lord said, I have pardoned according to your word, but truly as I live, and as all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the Lord, none of the men who have seen my glory and my signs that I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and yet have put me to the test these ten times and have not obeyed my voice, none of these shall see the land that I swore to give to their fathers.

And none of those who despise me shall see it. But my servant Caleb, because he has a different spirit and has followed me fully, I will bring into this land into which he went, and his descendants shall possess it.

Now, since the Amalekites and the Canaanites dwell in the valleys, turn tomorrow and set out for the wilderness by the way of the Red Sea. And the Lord spoke to Moses and to Aaron, saying, How long shall this wicked congregation grumble against me?

[9 : 07] I have heard the grumbling of the people of Israel, which they grumble against me. Say to them, As I live, declares the Lord, what you have said in my hearing, I will do to you.

Your dead body shall fall in this wilderness. And all of your number listed in the census, from twenty years old and upwards, who have grumbled against me, not one shall come into the land where I swore that I would make you dwell, except Caleb, the son of Jephunneh, and Joshua, the son of

Nun.

But your little ones, who you said would become a prey, I will bring in, and they shall know the land that you have rejected. But as for you, your dead bodies shall fall in this wilderness, and your children shall be shepherds in the wilderness forty years, and shall suffer for your faithlessness, until the last of your dead bodies lies in the wilderness.

According to the number of days in which you spied out the land, forty days, a year for each day, you shall bear your iniquity forty years, and you shall know my displeasure.

I, the Lord, have spoken. Surely, this will I do to all this wicked congregation who are gathered here together against me.

[10:37] In this wilderness, they shall come to a full end, and there they shall die. And the men who Moses sent out to spy the land, who returned, and made all the congregation grumble against him by bringing up a bad report about the land, the men who brought up a bad report of the land, died by plague before the Lord.

Of those men who went to spy out the land, only Joshua, the son of Nun, and Caleb, the son of Jephunneh, remained alive. When Moses told these words to all the people of Israel, the people mourned greatly.

And they rose early in the morning and went up to the heights of the hill country, saying, here we are. We will go up to the place that the Lord has promised, for we have sinned.

But Moses said, why now are you transgressing the command of the Lord when that will not succeed? Do not go up, for the Lord is not among you, lest you be struck down before your enemies.

For there the Amalekites and the Canaanites are facing you, and you shall fall by the sword, because you have turned back from following the Lord. The Lord will not be with you. But they presumed to go up to the heights of the hill country, although neither the ark of the covenant of the Lord nor Moses departed out of the camp with them.

[12:15] Then the Amalekites or the Canaanites who lived in that hill country came down and defeated them, and pursued them, even to Horma.

Amen. May God bless to us this, his word. Well, good morning to you.

Do please have those chapters and numbers open before you, numbers 13 and 14, as we will be making our way through these this morning. How will we ever make it to the promised land?

How were the Israelites going to make it? How do we make it to the promised land? These are the questions we've been tackling in these chapters in the book of Numbers over the last few Sundays. Back in chapter 10, we saw the people of Israel begin their march towards the promised land. And they started well. They started promisingly. And to make it, they would need to keep on obeying, keep trusting what God had said, and remember that God was with them.

[13:31] And then last week, we saw the grumbling, grumbling in the ranks. A major problem because grumblers doubt the provisions of the Lord, and because grumblers deserve judgment.

Would they learn the lesson? Would the Israelites trust God to provide for them and lead them into the lands? By chapter 13 here, they've made it to the brink of the promised land.

They've reached a place called Kadesh Barnea. This is a massive moment in the people of Israel. This is what they've been waiting for for hundreds of years.

The promise made to Abraham is within touching distance. It was what Moses was called to do, to lead the people out of slavery in Egypt and into the land flowing with milk and honey.

Will they make it? It's a huge moment in the history of Israel, and yet, as we've read, it is one of the greatest disappointments in the whole Bible.

[14:37] It lives long in the national memory. Longer than Brazil's 7-1 drubbing at the hands of Germany will linger in the national memory of Brazil. This is high drama.

There's lots going on. There's spies. There's giants. And sadly, defeat snatched from the jaws of victory. At the very heart of this story is the issue of belief, or more precisely, unbelief.

Why didn't that first generation make it to the promised land? They didn't believe God when he said he would be with them, that he would give them the promised land.

It's right there at the very start of chapter 13. Send the spies out to the land, which I am giving to the people of Israel. They didn't believe it when God said he would give them the land.

And as the writers of the Hebrews put it, they were unable to enter because of unbelief. After all the drama of the Exodus, after all the journey through the wilderness, hundreds of thousands of people

marching to the brink of the land, and yet, when they get there, when it's literally within their grasp, they chicken out.

[15:56] Can you believe it? After all that God had done for them, after hearing the report about the land, they can see the abundant fruit in front of them.

They bail out. It's astonishing, isn't it? They forfeit the land. So we're going to trace the storyline of these chapters now, and along the way, we'll make some observations about the great theme of the passage, belief.

If Moses, remember, wrote numbers for that second generation, this first generation's children, Moses was writing to them, and he's saying to that second generation, don't be foolish like your parents were.

Believe what God has said, and enter the lands. And for you and me now, we're to heed the warning, and believe what God has said, and so enter his kingdom.

Yes, the promised land to come, the new creation, but also now, as we carry on the work of building Christ's kingdom here. So, let's jump into the drama.

[17:03] We're going to look at each scene, as you would perhaps in a movie, and there are six scenes, and we'll go through them quite quickly. Scene one, first half of chapter 13, the spies set out.

So, the first scene sees 12 spies, chosen to go into the land of Canaan, to suss it out. You can almost sense the anticipation, as these men pack their bags, and head off.

Notice, they're not asked, to evaluate whether or not, the Israelites should go into the land. That's not what they've been asked to do. No, Moses gives them a set of criteria to report back on.

What's the land like? Is it good and rich, or is it bad and poor? What are the people like? Are they strong or weak? Are they many or few? What about the cities? What are they like? And so, off the 12 spies go, disappearing into the horizon.

Scene two, the spies report, second half of chapter 13. Over a month of silence, and waiting. Forty days, they're gone.

[18:09] The excitement builds in the camp. You can sense the anticipation, as the whole people of Israel wait to hear the news. What's the land going to be like? What's waiting for us?

Well, we get the factual report from the spies, in verses 25 to 29. And all 12 are in agreement about the facts, the land flows with milk and honey.

Just look at these fruits. Two men had to carry these cluster of grapes. Can you imagine the size of it? Pomegranates, figs. The people are strong.

The cities are big, and well defended. Great benefits to the land. This is a good land that God is bringing them to. But there is realism as to the challenge that lay ahead.

This is a slightly daunting prospect. They've heard about the enemy. They're going to have to go and fight. Remember, from chapter 10, this is a battle march.

[19:11] They're going in to fight. And here's the enemy. This is the sort of thing you feel in the pit of your stomach. The fear begins to well up.

You can imagine the whispering and discussion that went on as the report was given. Caleb, verse 30, had to quieten down the people. You can imagine the hubbub as people talk to their neighbors.

The spies are agreed on the facts, but two very different conclusions are reached. There's a minority report, and there's a majority report.

The minority report from Caleb and Joshua expresses faith in God's promises. Look at verse 30, where Caleb gives a summary of the minority report.

Let us go up at once and occupy the land, for we are well able to overcome it. Caleb expresses belief. In other words, he took God's promises at face value.

[20:14] God has promised the land, so let's go. Well, what about the majority report from the other ten? They reach the absolute opposite conclusion.

Just take a look. Verse 31, We are not able to go up, for they are stronger. It's a land that devours its inhabitants, and all the people that we saw in it are of great height.

The majority, they don't take God's promise about giving them the land at face value. They don't believe that God can give it to them.

They don't trust that God can do what he says he will do, and so they allow their fear to determine their course of action rather than what God had promised. On the basis of the same facts, the eyes of belief and the eyes of unbelief reach wildly different conclusions.

It wasn't as if these twelve people saw different things. They saw the same things. They both saw the reality of the enemy. Both, no doubt, felt real, gripping fear.

[21 : 29] But the determining fact is, for them, and us now, what do you think of God's promises? The facts are the same for everyone.

The Bible sets out for us God's great promises, promises of forgiveness, of salvation, of eternal life. It's all there in the Bible. Will you take what God says at face value or not?

That was what was going to get that second generation to the promised land, taking God at his word. And it's what gets us to the promised land, taking God at his word, believing.

Don't let fear, which is very real, let you fail to take the land. Faith prevails over fear. They both saw the same facts, but they reached completely different conclusions.

So that's the spies. That's the second scene. Let's move on to the third scene. The camera now swings from the 12 spies up here giving their reports to the people of Israel.

[22 : 43] What will they make of what they've just heard? Astonishingly, having come this far, they follow the majority reports. Unbelief.

The people can see the land. They can see its fruit. And yet they unbelief. Three observations from this section.

Firstly, unbelief knows no history. Second observation, truth well expressed doesn't guarantee belief. Observation three, evidence clearly seen doesn't guarantee belief.

So firstly, unbelief knows no history. And we're looking at the first four verses of chapter 14 here. What is going on here?

Why such unbelief? Well, stealing a phrase from Dale Ralph Davis here, the problem is that unbelief knows no history. Unbelief knows no history.

[23 : 48] The people's perspective is all wrong. We saw something of this last week with the grumbling. They were only concerned with the contemporary. They were only concerned of what they could see now.

They had no memory of what God had done and said in the past. They forgot the history. The right to forget has been in the news recently, hasn't it?

You can make a request to Google to remove certain results from its search engine. Perhaps an unflattering news report you don't want people to see.

Like it never happened. This is what the Israelites were in effect doing. It's as if they hadn't just witnessed the exodus or the parting of the Red Sea or the provision of manna in the desert.

It's as if they had submitted a request to Google to have the whole thing scrubbed from their history. Unbelief has its roots in forgetting. The people forgot all that God had done for them.

[24 : 53] So as we sometimes trundle through the wilderness of life, don't just see the contemporary. Don't forget all that the Lord has done for us in Jesus Christ.

Don't forget that he's coming back. There is a promised land to come. Don't forget. Unbelief knows no history. But we do so often forget, don't we?

Why? Why do I forget? Well, it usually begins when something turns out okay. Not a complete disaster.

I start thinking self-reliant thoughts. I can do things on my own. I see less need to lean on God for my daily provisions. And everything becomes more and more dependent on me.

And so my horizon shrinks to me. What God has done in the past becomes less relevant. becomes more and more dependent on me. I begin to forget.

[25 : 58] So instead of forgetting, particularly when things go well, remember that everything, the good times and the bad, even your every breath comes from the Lord.

Don't forget. So our first observation, unbelief knows no history. The Israelites completely forgot. They saw their past in Israel with rose-tinted glasses.

They forgot the reality. Second observation, looking on to 5 to 10. Truth well expressed doesn't guarantee belief. Truth well expressed doesn't guarantee belief.

We see in these verses, look at verse 5, Moses and Aaron fell on their faces. Verse 6, Joshua and Caleb tear their clothes. They're devastated.

And Caleb speaks to the people. What does he say? If the Lord delights in us, he will bring us to the land. Don't rebel against the Lord. Don't fear the people.

[27 : 04] These are words of unbelief. Sorry, these are the words of belief. They see the same things as everyone else, but they see more.

Their perspective is informed by what they see and by what God has said and promised. They see the reality. They see what God has promised. And so they see the Lord is with them.

And it's on that basis that they are confident to go and take the land. They speak the truth clearly. They speak the reality. But how do the people respond?

Well, verse 10, they seek to stone them with stones. Let me observe that truth well expressed doesn't guarantee anything.

Truth expressed winsomely, accurately, eloquently doesn't guarantee belief. Caleb speaks wonderful truth here, doesn't he? And yet the people want to stone him.

[28 : 15] It's remarkable. And it's true today, isn't it? Don't you long for your friend, your neighbor, your family member to come to saving faith?

them hearing an excellent presentation of the gospel in itself doesn't guarantee anything. Yes, they must hear the truth, absolutely.

We must make every effort to communicate the truth clearly and well and truthfully. But that in itself doesn't guarantee anything. Faith comes from hearing and believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, trusting that what the Bible says is true and needs responding to.

So yes, tell your friend about the good news of what Jesus has done. Yes, bring them to church.

Yes, invite them to Christianity Explored. But pray that their eyes will be opened to see the reality.

Pray that their spiritual blindness will be removed. The people of Israel heard the truth. It's expressed wonderfully, isn't it, by Caleb. And yet they responded with total opposition.

[29 : 27] Truth well expressed doesn't guarantee anything. But it does need to be expressed. Third observation. Evidence clearly seen doesn't guarantee anything.

It's 11 to 12. What stops the people from carrying out their stoning? The glory of the Lord appears and stops them in their tracks. And here we see the only verdict that really truly matters.

And it's the Lord's verdict on the people. How long will this people despise me? How long will they not believe in me in spite of all the signs I've done among them?

We saw with Caleb that truth well expressed doesn't guarantee belief. Now we see that evidence clearly seen doesn't either. How long will they not believe in me, says the Lord, in spite of all the signs I've done?

What more evidence could the people of Israel have wanted? They had seen firsthand the Lord bring plague upon plague upon plague upon the Egyptian slave masters.

[30 : 37] They had seen miraculous provision of food in the wilderness. Many signs the Lord had done. And yet, they did not believe.

Evidence clearly seen guarantees nothing. The people despised God. They refused to believe. And so the Lord pronounces his judgment.

What can we say in defense of the people? Not much. It's deserved, isn't it? The Lord is quite right, isn't he, to bring this judgment on the people who persistently pursue unbelief in the face of truth well expressed and evidence clearly seen.

You and I have all the evidence we need right here in the Bible. The Bible is sufficient for belief.

Lack of evidence isn't a legitimate excuse. So three observations on belief there in the third scene as we see the people that are on belief.

[31 : 49] Scene four, Moses intercedes, verses 13 to 19. Moses, the great mediator, the one who stands between the people and God, he pleads on behalf of the people.

He pleads with the Lord not to carry out this judgment, this judgment of complete wiping out. How does Moses reason with God? Well, he doesn't plead the merits of the people.

Rather, he pleads on the basis of the Lord's name, his reputation. What will people think of you?

What will the Egyptians make of you if you do this?

And he pleads on the basis of the Lord's character, his steadfast love. How does the Lord respond?

Scene five, the Lord's judgment and mercy. There in verses 20 to 38, the Lord's judgment and mercy. The Lord doesn't wipe out Israel entirely.

[32 : 57] He does pardon them. But none of that first generation will make it to the promised lands. The generation that saw all that God had done, none of them were going to make it.

God sends them back out into the wilderness for 40 years. but their children, the second generation, they shall know the land that the first generation rejected.

The first generation are to die in the wilderness but their children, the second generation, they were the ones who were going to enter. what mercy when God could quite justifiably have wiped them

out.

And just look on to the first bit of chapter 15. The Lord spoke to Moses, this is immediately after that great unbelief at the end of chapter 14. The Lord spoke to Moses saying, speak to the people of Israel and say to them, when you come into the land, when you come into the land, what great mercy after all that unbelief the next instructions are about when you get there.

What mercy, what grace. So we see the Lord's judgment and mercy. Final scene, scene 6, verse 39 to the end.

[34 : 25] The persistent unbelief of the people. This final scene is probably the saddest of all. After all they've seen, after all they've just heard from the Lord about why they've been sent back out into the wilderness, they repeat exactly the same mistake.

They do not listen to what God has said and they do not believe again. When the Lord promised to be with them and told them to go into the land, they didn't go.

Now the Lord has told them to go into the wilderness. He's not with them. What do they do? Well, they try and go into the land. It's utter stupidity, isn't it?

Imagine watching this unfold in a film. You'd be shouting at the TV, don't do it. Didn't you just hear what Moses said?

They repeat their mistake of unbelief again. When the Lord said he wasn't with them, they went and they were defeated. In the face of certain victory, the land was within reach.

[35 : 44] They snatched defeat from the jaws of certain victory. So what about us? The question for us is, who live on this side of the cross, will we make it to the promised land, the new creation?

As we've said, this has a now element and a future element. Yes, we're heading to the land God has promised, but we're not there yet.

We live in the in-between times. God's kingdom has come, but not yet fully. We can enter the kingdom now, but not in its fullest sense.

There is more and better to come. That's the great Christian hope. How do we enter the land? How do we enter the kingdom? Well, for the Israelites on the brink of the promised land in Numbers chapter 14, and for us now, it's a question of belief.

The question for you is, what do you make of the good news about Jesus as contained in the Bible? Do you believe that he says who he says he is?

[36 : 57] Do you accept what the Bible says about the events in Jesus' life, his death, his resurrection, his ascension? Do you believe that you're a sinner in need of salvation?

Do you believe that Jesus Christ died in your place for your sin? So if you're not a Christian here this morning, if you're looking in, if you're standing on the brink, can I urge you heed the warning of the unbelief of the Israelites?

It did not go well for them. In the face of truth well expressed and evidence clearly seen, they chose fear over faith. What will you do with the evidence?

Believe, Numbers 14 would urge you. And in the words of Psalm 95, which we read at the start, today, if you hear his voice, do you not harden your hearts?

Perhaps you're a Christian, you've started well, but as time goes on, as life perhaps draws to its twilight years, as you stand on the brink, on the brink of glory, don't get cold feet, don't forget all that God has done for you in the past.

[38 : 24] Unbelief knows no history. Don't forget, don't get cold feet. The Israelites' unbelief was persistent.

It was perverse in light of all that God had done. They were so utterly foolish to keep unbelieving. All the good God had promised was within touching distance. And yet they chose unbelief.

So remember this, as one preacher put it, unbelief is the only thing that can bar our access into heaven and our enjoyment of peace along our earthly pilgrimage.

Unbelief is the only thing that can bar us from enjoying those things. Rather than unbelief, heed the warning of Hebrews chapter 4 where the writer speaking about these very events, urges his readers to strive to enter the rest so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience.

Believe what God has said. All the great promises of salvation and eternal life, cling to them with the eyes of faith. See them as Joshua and Caleb did, as certainties because of the faithfulness of the God who made those promises.

[39 : 46] encourage one another in the church family to keep believing, to strive to enter that rest. On the basis of history, on the basis of truth clearly expressed, on the basis of evidence clearly

seen, believe and keep believing.

don't get cold feet. Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
Amen.