

At Odds With The Majority Numbers 13-14

Joshua's Account of His Spy Expedition:

The majority of my people treat God with contempt. They refuse to trust Him to fulfill His promises. Because of my choice to follow God wholeheartedly, they talk behind my back about how to get rid of me. Perhaps you are thinking that I am talking about the kinds of struggles God's people encounter in the 21st century. There are a lot of similarities, but no, I am talking about what it was like to live amongst my people, Israel, in the 1400's B.C.

If doing what God wants you to do puts you at odds with the majority of the people around you, how would you respond?

I understand that there are occasions when it looks like we would be better off doing what "everyone else is doing" instead of obeying God. Looks, in this case, are deceiving. It might look like those who treat God with contempt and refuse to believe in Him are better off. In reality, it is those who trust in God who will be victorious and will experience His bountiful blessings in the end. I learned this lesson first hand. Let me tell you part of my story.

It should have been a time of triumph for my people, Israel. God dramatically delivered us from the powerful Egyptians. He decimated that superpower nation by sending 10 plagues that destroyed Egypt's crops and livestock, brought physical pain and suffering, and worst of all caused her people the grief of losing their firstborn sons.

Following our exodus from Egypt, Pharaoh had second thoughts about letting us go and pursued us with his army. His attempt to chase us down proved to be no threat to God's plan for our deliverance as the LORD totally destroyed Egypt's forces in the Red Sea, while at the same time providing for our safe passage on dry ground.

On our journey away from Egypt, we enjoyed God's protection and provision even though we acted unfaithfully toward Him.

There was the time when we were without water and the only water we could find was bitter. We grumbled and complained, but God graciously made the water sweet.

On another occasion, we ran out of food and responded by grumbling and complaining, but God dealt with us mercifully, providing all the manna and quail we needed.

The most frightening test of our faith was when we were attacked by the Amalekites at Rephidim. We did not have a trained and developed military. There was nothing we could have done in our own strength to deal with the threat of this attack. However, God came to our defense as Moses lifted up his staff as the demonstration of our dependence on Him. God gave us victory and delivered us from the Amalekites. We learned in this, our first military conflict, that the battle belongs to the LORD—He is our Banner—He is the One on whom we need to focus and depend when our enemies threaten us.

Three months after we left Egypt, we came to the desert of Sinai where we spent almost a year. It was at Mount Sinai that God gave us His law to govern us and to set us apart as His people from all the pagan nations around us.

From Mount Sinai, we traveled together to Kadesh, a town on the border of the land flowing with milk and honey that God promised Israel. This was a great moment of triumph for Israel, or so I thought.

The name Moses gave me reflects my perspective as to what I believed God was going to do. My father Nun gave me the name Hoshea, which means salvation. Moses renamed me Joshua which means Yahweh is Salvation. I was confident the LORD would save us, whatever foes we might face in the land He promised to give us. My perspective on the future was optimistic because my focus was on the LORD.

You can imagine my utter delight when Moses selected me as one of the twelve spies sent to explore the Promised Land. I would be one of the first to see with my own eyes the land flowing with milk and honey that God promised to Israel.

Moses, wanting a thorough report, gave us several specific things to look for as we spied out the Promised Land. He wanted us to see if the inhabitants were strong or weak, few or many. He asked us to take note of the land, whether it was good or bad; the towns, whether they were unwalled or fortified; the soil, whether it was fertile or poor; and the trees, whether it had forests or not. Moses also asked that we not come back empty handed. Being early grape season, he asked us to do our best to bring back some fruit of the land.

Our exploration journey took a period of forty days. We found the land to be very good, full of rich soil, stately trees, and lush vegetation. The produce was so abundant that it took two men carrying a pole between them to carry a single cluster of grapes along with some pomegranates and figs.

Upon our return to Kadesh, we gave Moses this initial account, “We went into the land to which you sent us, and it does flow with milk and honey! Here is its fruit.”

At this point, it was my intention to elaborate more fully on the abundance of the land and to express my confidence in what God would do to help us acquire it. However, to my utter shock, the majority of my fellow spies had different plans for the report they would give. Ten of them shared an account that inspired not faith as I intended to do, but fear.

They launched into a list of reasons why they believed going into the land was a bad idea. They took their focus off of the LORD, our Banner, and focused instead on all of the obstacles they saw in our way. Their brief mention of the productivity and abundant goodness of the land was offset both by their fearful reports of the powerful occupants living there and of the large size of their fortified cities.

The 10 spies especially made a big deal about the fact that the descendants of Anak lived in the Promised Land. What is the big deal about the Anakites? Yes, they are strong and tall. Yes, we heard it said of them, “Who can stand up against the Anakites?” But what match would these giants be against the LORD our God. Yes, the giants were big, but our God is infinitely bigger.

The fact that we found giants in the land didn’t take God by surprise. He knew they were there and had already assured us that He would go ahead of us like a devouring fire. He promised to destroy the Anakites and subdue them before us. He promised He would drive them out and annihilate them quickly (See Deuteronomy 9:1-3). Since our battle was the LORD’S battle, we would win. Unfortunately, the ten spies didn’t see it that way.

The ten didn’t stop at mentioning the descendants of Anak. They went on to report about the Amalekites, Hittites, Jebusites, Amorites, and Canaanites. They considered the presence of these nations to be an insurmountable obstacle to our entry into the land. They should have regarded this long list of nations in the Promised Land to be an indication of the numerous victories God was going to give us in fulfillment of His promises. Instead, each nation was regarded as yet one more hurdle in the way to stop us.

I already mentioned previously one of these people groups. God gave us a resounding victory in our first battle against the Amalekites. The details of this conflict were carefully recorded to remind me and my people that God is able to take care of our enemies and that we can trust Him to deliver us. Without a doubt, God would give us victory not only against the Amalekites, but against any people who are foolish enough to stand as an enemy in defiance of the living God.

Caleb and I utterly refused to go along with the evil report of the ten. We were committed to standing up and doing the right thing before the LORD no matter what others had decided to do.

In the midst of the report of the ten, Caleb could not keep silent for one more second. He silenced the people before Moses and said, “We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it.” Caleb’s passionate plea fell on deaf ears as the people continued to give their attention to what the ten evil spies had to say.

As the ten continued to share their observations, they went from telling a truthful, but fear filled story, to giving an exaggerated, evil report.

They said the land we explored was a hostile environment that devours the people. No longer did the people see the grapes we brought back as a reminder of plenty, but as a reminder of the powerful, large people who lived there. No longer were the grapes a source of joy in the abundance and productivity of the land, but a source of fear.

The spies grossly exaggerated the size of the giants in the Promised Land. They said about these Nephilim, “We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them.” Through the eyes of fear that are focused on the enemy, they would have looked very big, but through the eyes of faith, focused on the LORD and His promises, it was the Nephilim who appeared to me as grasshoppers.

Unfortunately, the ten evil spies were successful in frightening the sandals off the Israelites. Their fear inspiring words led my people to raise their voices and weep aloud. The whole group grumbled against Moses and Aaron, forgetting of course that their ultimate complaint was against God. The people said, “If only we had died in Egypt or in this desert! Why is the LORD bringing us to this land only to let us fall by the sword?” In their rebellion and ingratitude they considered it preferable to have already fallen dead.

The complaining continued, “Our wives and children will be taken as plunder.” I was sympathetic to their concern for the most vulnerable in our group. However, even the most vulnerable in our midst, our children, had nothing to fear because of God’s promises to be with us and fight for us.

The rebellious complaining of the people moved from bad to worse. They went so far as to express their wish to go back to Egypt, considering their past there to be better than any future we might have in Canaan.

The people proposed replacing Moses as Israel’s leader and going back. How could the people think Egypt was better? How could they forget the hard labor and harsh treatment we had to endure as slaves under the oppressive hands of our taskmasters? How could they choose to forget all the incredible miracles God performed to deliver us? How could they so quickly forgot about all the wonderful ways He protected us and provided for us?

How easy it is to lose perspective when we focus on the things around us rather than focusing on the banner over us, who is the LORD.

Moses and Aaron responded to the rebellion and contempt of the people by falling to their faces in awe of God's presence and in anticipation of what He might do as an act of judgment against His rebellious people. Caleb and I tore our clothes as a gesture to show the deep distress and mourning we felt in our hearts.

The two of us gave our own report of what the land was like, hoping to convince our people to turn from their unbelief and to trust in God. We told the people that the land was exceedingly good, a land flowed with milk and honey. We assured them that if the LORD was pleased with us, He would give us this land. If only they would not rebel against the LORD and not be afraid of the people of the land, we would swallow up the enemy.

The whole balance of power had been altered. The protection of the inhabitants of the land was gone—we couldn't physically see it yet, but by faith we believed that God had taken it away. With God on our side and with the enemies' protection removed, we could enter the land confidently and with absolutely no fear.

Despite our plea, the people rebelled. The talk amongst the assembly was focused on how they might stone us. The people of Israel had the attitude towards God's messengers that if they didn't want to hear what we had to say, they would try to get rid of us by killing us.

At that moment, the LORD came to our aide. His glory appeared at the Tent of Meeting for all the Israelites to see. God rebuked Israel by asking two questions of Moses, "How long will these people treat me with contempt? How long will they refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the miraculous signs I have performed among them?" God suggested to Moses that He would strike the nation down with a plague and destroy the people and then make him into a nation that was greater and stronger than Israel at that time.

Moses pleaded with God not to do this out of concern for His reputation amongst the Egyptians and the other nations. The report would spread of God's powerful deliverance of Israel from Egypt and of His spectacular demonstrations of His presence with His people. Moses was concerned that the nations would say about the LORD that He was unable to bring the people into the land He promised, so he slaughtered them in the desert.

Moses understood that the LORD would have to enact His judgment in some way as He does not leave the guilty unpunished. He asked that the LORD'S strength in bringing judgment against Israel be displayed in such a way as to reflect the fact that He is slow to anger, abounding in love, and forgiving of sin and rebellion. Moses requested that Israel be forgiven just as He had pardoned them from the time they left Egypt until that time.

In answer to Moses' request, God forgave the people and did not kill them right then and there as they deserved. Nevertheless, God declared that as surely as He lives and as surely as His glory fills the whole earth, not one of those who saw His glory and the miraculous signs He performed and who disobeyed and tested Him would ever see the land He promised to Israel. All who treated God with contempt would be kept from seeing it.

The grumbling that my people did against God came back to hurt them. They said that they would rather die in the desert than be led into Canaan to die by the sword, so God, in judgment, decided to grant them their request. All those 20 years old or more, who were counted in the most recent census, would die in the desert with the exception of myself and Caleb. Only the two of us along with Israel's children would survive and be spared the judgment of their parents. How ironic, when you think of it, that the very ones the people were most concerned about because of their vulnerability to enemy attack lived to enjoy the land while all the adults perished.

While the children would eventually live in the land and experience the promise of God, they would not do so until every last one of their parents died in the desert. For forty years they would suffer because of their parent's unfaithfulness, one year for each of the days the spies spent exploring the land. During that period of time, the people of Israel would suffer for their sins and know what it is like to have God against them.

The judgment of the ten spies responsible for spreading an evil report was immediate. They were struck down and died of a plague before the LORD. They perished first because they led others to treat the LORD with contempt and to refuse to believe in Him. Their death served as immediate confirmation of the judgment God promised He would bring on my people.

You would think that after the LORD told us four times that all those who rebelled would fall in the desert, the people would believe Him. However, just as they failed to believe His promise to give Israel the Promised Land, they failed to believe His promise of judgment.

The people thought that mourning and simple acknowledgment of their sin would be enough. They thought they would be able to go up to the place the LORD promised. Such a course was doomed to fail because it went against what God promised to do as a consequence for their rebellion.

Their battle plans were doomed because not only was the Lord not with them, but He was against them. Presuming upon the LORD, they went up to the high hill country anyway to attack the Canaanites and Amalekites, but were attacked and beat down. It was too late to change their minds. The consequences of their rebellion were now irreversible.

With God's help, Caleb and I had a different spirit than the rest of our people. Whereas they treated God with contempt and did not believe in Him, we followed God wholeheartedly.

The reward of faithfulness for Caleb and I is that we were promised that we would be able to enter the Promised Land. That the land would be given to Israel was never in doubt, as God's promise to give it to us was unconditional. However, our ability to experience the blessing of possessing the land ourselves was conditioned on our obedience to the LORD. Sadly, out of our generation, only Caleb and I experienced that blessing.

Taking a stand that put me at odds with the majority certainly wasn't easy, but I learned that it is always worth it to trust God to fulfill His promises and to follow Him wholeheartedly.

How about you? Are you standing on the promises of God, wholeheartedly following Him and trusting Him to do everything He said He would do? God will surely do all He has promised! You can trust Him! You will see the LORD'S promises come to fruition just as I did!

Lessons from Joshua's story:

1. Let's follow God wholeheartedly without delay

There comes a time when it is too late for us to change our minds regarding whether or not we are going to follow God's will. Yes, God is forgiving of our sin when we confess it, but if we go too far down a rebellious path, we might face irreversible and painful consequences as Israel did. We dare not remain unmoved by this account of the wrath of God against sin and the consequences we might face when we intentionally refuse to trust God to do what He said and when we treat God with contempt by rebelling against His will.

2. Let's allow God to shape how we view and approach our difficulties rather than letting our difficulties shape our view of and response to God

Israel's focus was on the obstacles and difficult circumstances around her. The people focused on themselves and their own limitations. They looked at God through the lens of what they were hearing and seeing and concluded, "We can't do it."

Joshua and Caleb's focus was on the LORD. Their focus was on the promises of God. They looked at their difficult circumstances through the lens of what they knew about God and what He had promised. Trusting God to protect and provide and to fulfill His promises, they concluded, "We can certainly do it."

What is our focus this morning? Is our focus on God and His promises? OR Is our focus on the circumstances around us?

3. Let's follow God wholeheartedly even when the crowd pressures us to go in the opposite direction

Our world encourages us to be lazy at work and critical of our boss. God wants us to do our work wholeheartedly as unto Him and to treat our boss with respect. The world tries to encourage business dealings that are dishonest, but God would have us to deal with others showing honesty and integrity. The world says that everyone should look out for themselves and that it is crazy when we don't stick up for our rights. God says that we are to consider other people ahead of ourselves, looking not for how people can serve us, but for how we can serve others. The world encourages us to selfishly hoard our resources and indulge ourselves. God desires that when we see a need and have the resources to meet it, that we should faithfully and sacrificially give to help those in need. We could go on and on.

When we trust God and wholeheartedly do what He wants us to do, we will find ourselves at odds with the majority. Most in the unbelieving world won't appreciate us when our lives shine light on theirs' and expose all the ugly things they don't want us to see.

Even some amongst God's people will sometimes try to discourage us as the ten spies tried to discourage their people. They will say, "Hey, tone it down a little. You don't have to be so radical about your faith. Why don't you try to fit in a little more and not always try to be so different?"

When the majority doesn't want to go in God's direction, will we stand up and do what God wants anyway?

4. Let's follow God wholeheartedly even when the crowd tries to silence us because of our commitment

The Israelites did not appreciate Joshua and Caleb's report. After hearing it, the majority wanted to stone them. The rebellion and rejection of the crowd did not intimidate Joshua and Caleb from saying what God had for them to say. Even today, the majority in our world want to intimidate us as believers into silence. Most do not want to hear the good news we have to share.

The majority of people in our world say that all religions lead to God and that we should be tolerant of other people's faith. By tolerance, they mean that we should regard what others believe to be as valid and true as what we believe. The tolerance preached in our day gives no room for proclaiming an exclusive message that leaves anyone out.

When we proclaim that Jesus is the only way to God, that there is salvation in no other, and that it is by faith alone plus nothing that we are delivered from sin's penalty, the world is very intolerant of us. They don't appreciate the good news we share. They threaten us and do their best to silence us. When the world tries to intimidate us into silence, will we trust God and take a stand against the crowd by proclaiming the gospel.

The majority of people in our world don't want to acknowledge the reality of eternal punishment in the lake of fire for all those who reject Christ. Their rejection of coming judgment is similar to how the people of Israel refused to acknowledge God's announcement of judgment for their rebellion at Kadesh.

When the subject of judgment comes up, will we follow the spirit of our age and try to be inclusive and universal, giving people the impression everyone somehow makes it to heaven? Or Will we graciously declare the exclusive message of the Bible—"Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him." The majority of people want us to keep quiet about coming judgment, but God has us to proclaim His Word in which several times He announces His judgments for those who fail to trust in Him.

Will we stand up and declare the good news for a lost and dying world on its way to judgment, or will we be intimidated into silence? Let's stand up together and give our report of the good news of Jesus Christ.