



TRANSITIONS: TRUSTING GOD IN TIMES OF CHANGE

WILDERNESS UNBELIEF

Numbers 13-14

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Introduction

We have been traveling with the ancient Israelites for several weeks now. And, let's just say, it's been an interesting ride. Their wilderness transition has been an interesting ride. It's of course been a bumpy ride too. But their experience has taught us a few things about our own experience of transition. More importantly, the Israelites have taught us about who *we* are; and, most importantly, their triumphs and their tragedies have taught us about who *God* is.

Now, as we open the thirteenth chapter of the Book of Numbers, we find Israel at last on the edge of the Promised Land. They've left Mount Sinai and moved further north. Now they're encamped in the wilderness of Paran, which is in effect the "southern doorstep of Canaan."¹ They are thus poised and ready for their final push. Perhaps just a few short months, no more than a year, and their wilderness transition will be over; they'll finally receive their inheritance and settle into their new home in the land of Canaan, a land, as the Lord told Moses long ago, "flowing with milk and honey" (Exodus 3:8).

So, they're all set to go! All set to go—until something happens. That is, until they see a final obstacle in their path. They want to take the land of Canaan, but as it turns out, they're not sure they can: there are giants in the land, and they are but grasshoppers in their own eyes. As a result, doubt begins to settle upon the hearts of some, and their doubt in turn spreads like a cancer, giving rise to unbelief among many. And this act of unbelief, wilderness unbelief, changes everything!

The Voice of Doubt: Giants and Grasshoppers (13:1-33)

The first half of Chapter 13 really sets the stage for the crisis to come in the second half of the chapter: namely, the report of the spies and the ensuing rebellion of the people. Here in these opening verses, we're told about the Lord's command to Moses to send up spies into the land (13:1-2); we then see Moses commission and send the spies out (13:3-20); and, lastly, we read about the reconnaissance mission of the spies (13:21-24).

Their mission was evidently very successful, so much so, in fact, that they return with a token of their success: when they came to the Valley of Eschol, they cut down a branch with a single cluster of grapes, and they carried it on a pole between two of them all the way back to the wilderness of Paran (13:23). A powerful image—one that is still used today, interestingly enough, as the official logo of Israel's Ministry of Tourism. More importantly, it is a powerful *reminder* of God's promise to give to the Israelites a land flowing with milk and honey. In other words, that cluster of grapes should have proved that God's promise was no fantasy, but an impending reality.

¹ Dennis T. Olson, *Numbers: Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1996), p. 77.

However, when the spies return to the camp, things take a turn for the worst. They have just spent forty days scouting out the land, and so understandably, they get together with Moses and Aaron and the whole congregation of Israel to have a little ‘show and tell’ session. What they showed the Israelites was very heartening indeed; they showed them the “fruit of the land” (13:26). But what they told them was far less encouraging, to put it mildly (13:27-29):

“We came to the land to which you sent us. It flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit.²⁸ 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.²⁹ The Amalekites dwell in the land of the Negeb. The Hittites, the Jebusites, and the Amorites dwell in the hill country. And the Canaanites dwell by the sea, and along the Jordan.”

Now whether you could actually hear an audible sigh of disappointment in response to this report, or simply see the disappointment on the faces of the Israelites, we do not know. What we do know is that Caleb, one of the twelve spies, recognized this unfortunate news had just burst their proverbial bubble. And so he springs into action once again, quiets down the people, and speaks a word borne of faith: “Let us go up at once and occupy it, for we are well able to overcome it” (13:30).

Evidently, though, Caleb’s minority report could not convince the majority of the spies; instead, they seemed dead-set on *not* being able to take the land. “We are not able to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we are” (13:31). And to ensure that their view wins out over Caleb’s, the rest of the spies, like a bunch of unethical press secretaries, distribute a little disinformation to the masses. That is, they let loose a “bad report” within Israel; a bad report because it’s a skewed report, an embellished report, an unbelieving report (13:32-33):

So they brought to the people of Israel a bad report of the land that they had spied out, 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 great height.³³ And there we saw the Nephilim (the sons of Anak, who come from the Nephilim), and we seemed to ourselves like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them.”

So we see, then, the spies not only contradict Caleb’s call for courage, but cast their whole experience of spying out the land in a much more negative light. Rather than fixing their gaze on the grapes as a telltale sign of God’s provision and promise and plan, they instead focus their attention on the fact that there are giants in the land. And instead of trusting in the greatness of their God, they cower at the fact that they are but grasshoppers in their own eyes. Thus they unwittingly reveal, not only their doubts about their prospect of success in taking the land, but also, and more importantly, their doubts about the promise of the Lord to deliver the land to them.

Yet how typical is the spies’ response to their perceived obstacles. In fact, the doubt we see in them is the doubt we often see in us. When a doubting heart encounters obstacles during times of transition, does it not tend to maximize the size of the problems and minimize the extent of the resources?² Doubt says things like this: “These problems are gigantic, and we are teeny-tiny, like little grasshoppers.” Though let’s be clear: the problem is not that we see

² I am indebted to Raymond Brown, *The Message of Numbers* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2002), pp. 118-119, for this way of putting it.

ourselves as grasshoppers. The problem is that we lose sight of the grapes of God's provision and fixate on those giant problems before us.

The Voice of Unbelief: Let Us Return to Egypt (14:1-4)

Regrettably, the bad report of the spies, and the doubt they expressed, spread like wildfire through the whole Israelite camp, setting it ablaze, not of course with confidence and courage, but with fear and unbelief. Evidently, it then hissed and burned all night long. So we read in 14:1-3:

Then all the congregation raised a loud cry, and the people wept that night. ² 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! ³ 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?"

Now this is not the first time the Israelites find themselves grumbling in the face of hardship. Here, however, their grief reaches a fever pitch, so much so that they do something drastic and deadly: they plot a leadership coup, and a return to slavery. "Let us choose a leader and go back to Egypt," is their rallying cry (14:4). This is indeed a drastic plan of action; nothing could be more drastic than wanting to turn freedom back into slavery. It is also a deadly plan: in fact, as we learn from the Lord's response to Israel's wilderness unbelief, it will end up costing an entire generation their lives!

Drastic and deadly, yes; but Israel's rebellion here is ultimately a massive expression of unbelief—wilderness unbelief. And it reveals the true nature of unbelief. Unbelief is nothing less than a repudiation of all that God is for us. Unbelief is a denial of God's past provision: "Would that we had died in the land of Egypt!" It is a disregard for his present provision: "Would that we had died in this wilderness." And it is a downplaying of his future promise of provision: "Why is the Lord bringing us into this land, to fall by the sword?"

In short, it is a disowning of what God has done for you in the past, what God is doing for you in the present, and what God will do for you in the future. That is the true and ugly nature of wilderness unbelief. And this is the voice of unbelief: Let us return to Egypt.

The Voice of Faith: The Lord is with Us (14:5-10)

As bad as this rebellion was, not all Israel was awash in unbelief. Yes, there was the doubt of the spies; yes, there was the rebellion and unbelief of the people. But there was also, thirdly and finally, the response of a few, the remnant, who speak with the voice of faith a word of reassurance.

Naturally, when Moses and Aaron see both the extent and the nature of the unbelief in Israel, they know to do only one thing. Fearing the wrath of God, yet praying for the mercy of God, "Moses and Aaron fell on their faces before all the assembly of the congregation of the people of Israel" (14:5). They're joined by Joshua and Caleb, who likewise fall prostrate upon the ground, tearing their clothes, and mourning Israel's wilderness unbelief.

But Joshua and Caleb do more than mourn. They speak. We have already heard the report of the spies, and we have witnessed the rebellion among the people. Now, we hear a word of

reassurance by the remnant, by these two faith-filled spies, these two “confident encouragers of God’s people.”³ Here’s what they say to the Israelites, a profound expression of faith, intended to serve as countermeasure against Israel’s profound unbelief (14:7-9):

“The land, which we passed through to spy it out, is an exceedingly good land. ⁸ 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. ⁹ Only do not rebel against the LORD. And do not fear the people of the land, for they are bread for us. Their protection is removed from them, and the LORD is with us; do not fear them.”

Notice, then, the difference between the voice of unbelief, as we heard it expressed earlier in this passage, and now the voice of faith here. The voice of faith speaks reassuringly about God’s good intentions: “If the Lord delights in us, he will bring us into this land and give it to us.” The voice of faith speaks confidently about God’s provision: “Do not fear the people of the land, for they are bread for us.” And the voice of faith speaks hopefully about God’s presence: “the Lord is with us; do not fear them.”

We’re reminded, then, that the decisive issue in times of transition is not the size of the obstacles, but the presence of the Lord. Is the Lord with you, or is he not? At the end of the day, that is all that matters. If the Lord is with you, then you have nothing to fear. Are you a grasshopper in your own eyes, or the eyes of others? No worries, if God is with you. Are the obstacles massive, gigantic? Fear not, for they will be reduced to loaves of bread upon which you can eat.

Conclusion

So we see in this story two very different *responses* to the obstacles we face during a times of wilderness transition. The first is the response of the Israelites, the response of wilderness doubt and unbelief. The second is that of Joshua and Caleb, the response of wilderness faith and confidence. The one says, “We can’t, we’re not able,” the other, “We can, God is able.” The one denies the provision of God, the other banks on it. And so the one turns back to Egypt in fear, while the other presses forward into Canaan in faith.

We also see in this passage the two *options* always before each one of us during our own times of wilderness transition. When we encounter obstacles along the way, where do we want to go? When there are giants in our path that make us feel like grasshoppers in our own eyes, to what do we then turn? And will we remember what God has already done, and trust what God has already promised?

Because wilderness unbelief is a real possibility for us all, the Scriptures exhorts us to take care (Heb. 3:12-13):

Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. ¹³ But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

An evil heart is just right around the corner for any one of us. A bad report, some disappointing news, a negative experience or influence, any one of these has the potential to do to us what the bad report of the spies did to Israel. And just as the stakes were high, and the threats were real for Israel, so too they are for you and me. “For,” as this passage from Hebrews

³ Raymond Brown, *The Message of Numbers*, p. 114.

goes on to say, “we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end” (3:14).

But this is also why the Scriptures so consistently point us back to the cross and the resurrection of Jesus Christ, back to all that God has already done for us; in order that we might be encouraged, take heart, and ultimately trust in the promises of God for the future. So the word of God reminds us (Rom. 8:32-35, 38):

He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? ³³ Who shall bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. ³⁵ Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? . . . ³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

And, finally, this is why the Scripture regularly reassures us of the unwavering presence of God in the life of every true believer. The presence of God was the antidote to Israel’s wilderness unbelief; and the presence of God is the antidote to our wilderness unbelief as well.

For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!” ¹⁶ The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷ and if children, then heirs— heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him (Rom. 8:15-17).

Yes, as we transition through the wilderness of this world, there will indeed be obstacles along the way. And we will therefore experience hardships and have to suffer. But we do so in faith, resting in God’s provision at the cross, crying “Abba! Father!” and, continuing to look to that day when we shall enter into the true and lasting Land of Promise and there be glorified with the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.