

Numbers 13: Biblical Reading and Reflections

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 17 April 2020

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

- [0 : 00] Numbers chapter 13 From the tribe of Judah, Caleb, the son of Jephunneh.
- From the tribe of Issachar, Igal, the son of Joseph. From the tribe of Ephraim, Hoshea, the son of Nan. From the tribe of Benjamin, Paltai, the son of Reifu.
- From the tribe of Zebulun, Gadiel, the son of Sodai. From the tribe of Joseph, that is, from the tribe of Manasseh, Gadai, the son of Susai. From the tribe of Dan, Amiel, the son of Gamalai.
- From the tribe of Asher, Sethe, the son of Michael. From the tribe of Naphtali, Nabai, the son of Vopsai. From the tribe of Gad, Gul, the son of Machai.
- These were the names of the men whom Moses sent to spy out the land. And Moses called Hoshea, the son of Nan, 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.
- [1 : 28] And whether the people who dwell in it are strong or weak, whether they are few or many. And whether the land that they dwell in is good or bad. And whether the cities that they dwell in are camps or strongholds.
- And whether the land is rich or poor. And whether there are trees in it or not. 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 Libo-Hemath. They went up into the Negev and came to Hebron. A high man, Shishai, and Talmi.
- The descendants of Anak were there. Hebron was built seven years before Zoan in Egypt. And they came to the valley of Eshcol. 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 Eshcol. Because of the cluster that the people of Israel cut down from there.
- [2 : 29] At the end of forty 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 to all the congregation.
- And showed them the fruit of the land. And they told him. 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 dwell 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 the people. For they are stronger than we are. So they brought to the people of Israel a bad report of the land that they had spied out.

[3 : 32] 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. And there we saw the Nephilim.

The sons of Anak who came from the Nephilim. And we seem to ourselves like grasshoppers. And so we seem to them. In Numbers chapter 13. Less than two years after leaving Egypt.

Israel is near the borders of the promised land. And spies are sent in to spy it out. This is perhaps the crisis moment in the wider story of the Exodus. Maybe even more significant than that of the golden calf.

Will the people take hold of the promise of the land? Or will they shrink back in unbelief? The spies are chosen. And they all lead men. Standing for each of the tribes. This is a representative task.

Not just a function that any group of men could perform. The men chosen to be the spies however. Are a rather different set of men. From the leaders of the tribes mentioned earlier. In chapters 1 to 2 and chapter 7.

[4 : 33] Perhaps the earlier lists are generally older men. While the spies need to be younger and more energetic leaders. We encounter Caleb here for the first time. Caleb is an important character from the tribe of Judah.

He is a Kenizzite. And the Kenizzite seem to have descended from Edom. Yet there might be indications that as a group of people. They were incorporated into the tribe of Judah. Caleb seems to have been some sort of prince among the tribe of Judah.

And as the tribe that would later become the source of the kings. This is a significant position that he is occupying. We are also told in this list that Joshua was originally called Hosea.

He was renamed Joshua by Moses. Joshua was the right hand man of Moses in many ways. He is the one who ascended with Moses up the mountain. Presumably not all the way.

But he was privy to a lot more than any of the other leaders of the people. The fact that Moses renamed him suggests some sort of father-son type relationship between the two. The task of the spies is to report on the quality of the land.

[5 : 36] Its inhabitants, its wealth and the character and fortification of their settlements. They are to go up into the Negev, the southern desert region. And from there all the way up into the hill country in the north and the region of Galilee.

In Judges chapter 18 we have another account of spying out a land as the Danites go up into the north. And that is a description of what people want to see when they spy out a land.

It's a land that is free for the taking. A land where people are not fortified. They are not prepared for enemies. But here it seems to be quite the opposite. The spying out of the land occurs at the time of the first ripe grapes.

Around mid-July. About two months after they had left Sinai. Deuteronomy chapter 1 verse 2 speaks of an 11 day journey from Horeb to Kadesh Barnea. From where they spied out the land.

They spy out the entire land from the wilderness of Sin in the south to Rehob in the north. Around the northern border described in chapter 34 verse 8. The length of the land is about 250 miles.

[6 : 40] And they took 40 days to explore it all. At Hebron about halfway up the length of the land. They encountered giants. The descendants of Anak. After Abraham had spied out the entirety of the land in Genesis chapter 13.

He had settled in Hebron. It was in the Hebron area that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had all sojourned. And it was near there that the patriarchs were buried. So it was naturally a very significant site for them.

The spies bring back word of the land. And fruit from the land. Grapes and pomegranates and figs. They confirm the words of the Lord's promise. Insofar as the land is indeed flowing with milk and honey.

However, they bring back a bad report concerning the people of the land. Who are powerful and live in well fortified cities. There are several different groups of people entrenched in the land.

Each seemingly mastering their own region. So the Anakim, the Malachites, the Hittites, the Jebusites, the Amorites and the Canaanites. It's a land where no single people group has been able to gain mastery.

[7 : 40] As it has quite varied terrain and several powerful groups. Each controlling a specific tract of land within it. While the land may be fruitful. Getting and retaining a foothold within the land.

Where there are so many warlike and fortified groups. None of which have been able to achieve dominance. Seems near impossible. God had originally determined to take Israel the longer way.

To avoid such a response. Recognizing that it would be understandable for them to retreat. When faced with the prospect of war. Exodus chapter 13 verse 17. When Pharaoh let the people go.

God did not lead them by the way of the land of the Philistines. Although it was near. For God said. Lest the people change their minds. When they see war. And return to Egypt.

However many events had intervened between this. And the point that we're at now. And by this point. The people should have known enough to trust the Lord. What was lacking was the faith and the courage.

[8 : 36] To grasp at the possibility of the full realization of their liberation. As long as they were in the wilderness. The job was only half done. And their position was precarious. Caleb at this point.

Tries to persuade the people. That they can indeed take the land. Yet is immediately opposed by the other spies. Who claim that they cannot take the land. And give a bad report of the land itself.

Claiming that it devours its inhabitants. They also speak of the giants of the land. Of the sons of Anak. Who are associated with the Nephilim. A group mentioned in Genesis chapter 6 verse 4.

As a consequence of their bad report. Their claim that the land devoured its inhabitants. They would end up being devoured by the wilderness. Joshua chapter 14 verses 6 to 15.

Relates an interesting epilogue to this account. Highlighting the way that Caleb is blessed. Because of his faithfulness at this point. At a later point in history. Then the people of Judah came to Joshua at Gilgal.

[9 : 33] And Caleb the son of Jephunneh the Kenizzite said to him. You know what the Lord said to Moses the man of God. In Kadesh Barnea concerning you and me. I was 40 years old when Moses the servant of the Lord.

Sent me from Kadesh Barnea to spy out the land. And I brought him word again as it was in my heart. But my brothers who went up with me. Made the heart of the people melt. Yet I wholly followed the Lord my God.

And Moses swore on that day saying. Surely the land on which your foot has trodden. Shall be an inheritance for you and your children forever. Because you have wholly followed the Lord my God.

And now behold the Lord has kept me alive. Just as he said these 45 years. Since the time that the Lord spoke this word to Moses. While Israel walked in the wilderness. And now behold I am this day 85 years old.

I am still as strong today as I was in the day that Moses sent me. My strength now as my strength was then. For war and for going and coming. So now give me this hill country of which the Lord spoke on that day.

[10 : 32] For you heard on that day how the Anakim were there. With great fortified cities. It may be that the Lord will be with me. And I shall drive them out just as the Lord said. Then Joshua blessed him.

And he gave Hebron to Caleb the son of Jephunneh for an inheritance. Therefore Hebron became the inheritance of Caleb the son of Jephunneh the Kenizzite to this day. Because he wholly followed the Lord the God of Israel.

Now the name of Hebron formerly was Kiriath Arba. Arba was the greatest man among the Anakim. And the land had rest from war. Here we see that the courageous faith of Caleb leads him to claim the land that was seen to be the greatest cause for turning back.

He has the faith to go in and take the land of the Anakim for himself. There may be another part of scripture in the background here as well. In Genesis chapter 37 we have another account in scripture of a bad report.

It's the only other time that we find it within the Pentateuch. And it's Joseph bringing back a bad report of his brothers to their father. Then later on in that chapter Joseph is sent on another mission of reconnaissance.

[11 : 41] Israel said to Joseph, Are not your brothers pasturing the flock at Shechem? Come, I will send you to them. And he said to him, Here I am. So he said to him, Go now, see if it is well with your brothers and with the flock and bring me word.

So he sent him from the valley of Hebron and he came to Shechem. A number of things that might remind us of the story we've just read. The valley of Hebron. The sending and bringing word.

As in the story of Numbers chapter 13. The story of Genesis chapter 37 ends in tragedy. There's weeping, tearing of clothes. Just as we see as a result of the spying out of the land and the bad report that's brought back in the following chapter.

And there might be something more going on here. There are ten brothers who are bad. And there are ten spies who are bad. And there are two good brothers. And there are two good spies.

In the story of Genesis chapter 37. Joseph is the one who's betrayed by his brothers. And the ringleader is Judah. Reuben tries to prevent things but fails.

[12 : 46] Here in Numbers chapter 13. We see some of these events playing out again. And I wonder whether it's significant that Judah and a descendant of Joseph stand side by side in appealing to the people.

And seeking to prevent what's about to take place. Even in the midst of a national tragedy in the making. There may be some small healing of an event in the past taking place.

A question to consider. In what way might the grapes of Eshcol give us a helpful way of seeing some aspect of the meaning of the Lord's Supper?

