

## **Series Life of Moses**

### **Scripture Numbers 13:1-14:4**

In the previous two messages we learned that the Israelites were on the move. They were headed northward away from Mount Sinai toward the land the LORD had promised to give to them. The LORD was with the people at all times. When they were on the march, the LORD was out front showing them the way to proceed. When the Israelites were encamped, the pillars of cloud and fire rose up from the tabernacle which was in the center of the camp.

In spite of this fact, we learned in chapters 11 and 12 that the Israelites had the audacity to complain and find fault with their circumstances. They complained that the journey was too hard and their food was too ordinary. Moses complained about the burdens of leading the people, and his sister and brother criticized Moses' leadership. These were examples of the attitudes and behavior of the Israelites. This pattern of complaints and grumblings first began just three days after the LORD had led them through the Red Sea and, now, more than one year later, they had not diminished.

The LORD considered these episodes as the rejection of His ways. He frequently displayed His displeasure by judging the people. After the incident of the golden calf idol, He would have destroyed all the people, except that Moses interceded for them. In spite of the LORD's presence and provisions, in spite of His efforts to teach the people about His ability to look after them, the attitudes of the people continued to be so negative that Moses was obliged to intercede for them more and more frequently.

The people did not learn from their experiences. Appallingly, they were not afraid to challenge the LORD — to complain about and question His guidance. They had no appreciation of the patience and grace and faithfulness shown to them by the LORD.

Today we come to one of the most significant examples of disobedience in the history of Israel. The LORD had led the Israelites to a place called Kadesh which was very near to the southern border of the promised land. Here the people reacted so strongly and negatively to what the LORD wanted them to do that their decision had an impact on the entire adult generation of those who had come out of Egypt.

The description of this entire episode requires a lot of verses, too many for us to think about in one day. Therefore, I will divide our study into two parts, half today and half in the next message.

### **Read Numbers 13:1-2, 17-14:4**

I'm sure there was a great deal of anticipation in the community of the Israelites when they arrived at Kadesh. They knew about the promise originally made to Abraham more than 400 years previously. They understood that the promise of the LORD was about to be fulfilled in them. They were aware that Abraham had sojourned in Canaan-land, and that the LORD had said to him, "'Arise, walk in the land through its length and its width, for I give it to you" (*Genesis 13:17*). I'm sure they could repeat the words of the covenant which the LORD made with Abraham, "To your descendants I have given this land" (*Genesis 15:18-19*). Whenever the LORD spoke of the promised land, He always emphasized that it was a gift.

It took 430 years for this promise to begin to be fulfilled, but when it was the right time for fulfillment, the LORD called Moses and told Him, "I have come down to deliver my people out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up from that land to a good and large land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanites and the Hittites and the Amorites and the Perizzites and the Hivites and the Jebusites" (*Exodus 3:8*); in other words, the land of promise.

The LORD not only spoke about the excellence of the land, but He was quite specific about what He would do to help the people enter the land. He said that His angel would "guard them along the way and bring them to the place prepared for them" (*Exodus 23:20*). He said His angel would drive out the existing inhabitants of the land (*Exodus 33:2*). He said He would send His terror ahead of the people in order to "throw into confusion every nation they would encounter" and that He would "make all their enemies turn their backs and run" (*Exodus 23:27*). The point is that the Israelites had received numerous assurances that the LORD would positively, definitely, without a doubt, enable them to successfully occupy the land.

Many other assurances were given to the Israelites. This episode in Numbers chapter 13 took place about 15 months after they had been delivered from their bondage in Egypt. During those months God had entered into a covenant relationship with His redeemed people. He had promised to be their God. He was dwelling in their midst. He had faithfully provided food for them. He had proven Himself to be attentive to their needs and gracious and trustworthy in every way. There was no reason for hesitancy about entering the land, except for lack of faith and confidence in the LORD. The bad mark on the Israelites was that they feared their enemies more than they feared the LORD.

The statement in verse 1 gives the impression that sending in the spies was the LORD's idea. There is a different slant on this in the parallel passage in the book of Deuteronomy. In reflecting on this episode to a later generation of Israelites, Moses used different words to explain what happened. He had encouraged the people at Kadesh, "See, the LORD your God has given you the land. Go up and take possession of it as the LORD, the God of your fathers, told you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged.' Then all the people came to me and said, 'Let us send men ahead to spy out the land for us, and bring back a report about the route we are to take and the towns we will come to.'"

In spite of the LORD's promises to lead them and make them successful in settling into the land, the people petitioned Moses to send in spies. This indicated a lack of faith in the LORD, although the LORD permitted the spies to be sent. Technically, the Israelites were not rebelling against the LORD by requesting the spies, but neither were they stepping out in obedience and confidence as they should have done. The mission of the spies might have had some value to the Israelites if it had served to increase their desire to enter the land, but, as we read after the return of the spies, it led to discouragement and refusal to obey God.

The instructions of Moses to the 12 men selected to explore the land were clear. They were to investigate the general condition of the land, whether the people in the land were strong or weak, few or many, whether the land was fertile or barren, whether there were trees or not, and whether the towns were unprotected or fortified.

Moses did not want the spies to offer opinions about favorable and unfavorable aspects of the land, nor did he want their opinion about strategy in taking the land. After all, the LORD had already promised to give them the land and to help them to take possession of it. The task of the spies was limited to objective fact-finding.

The spies were instructed to survey a very large area. Their beginning point was the Desert of Zin, which was near the camp of the Israelites, and the northernmost point was about 250 miles distance.

The first city the spies came to was Hebron. This was where the LORD had said to Abraham, "All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever" (*Genesis 13:15*). Abraham built an altar to the LORD at Hebron. He later purchased property in Hebron as a burial place for himself and other members of his family. I'm sure that the spies knew these historical facts, and the realization that they were walking on the same turf as had Abraham should have strengthened their faith in the trustworthiness of the LORD.

Verses 21 through 25 give us a very brief overview of the exploration of the land. The two points highlighted in these verses are, first, the giants who lived at Hebron, and second, the amazing fruit from the Valley of Eshcol. The three giants who are named were the descendants of the founder of Hebron (*Kirjath-arba*). These giants represented the difficulties associated with the conquest of the land, and the cluster of grapes represented the attractiveness and fecundity of the land.

*[Gratuitous information: One of the important symbols of modern Israel is a cluster of grapes hanging from a pole between two men.]*

After the spies returned to the community of the Israelites, they presented their information in an objective way: "The land flows with milk and honey," they said, and they could point to the cluster of grapes to illustrate their words. The phrase "milk and honey" was an idiom referring to the fruitfulness of the land.

Even the information in verse 28 was presented objectively: "The people who live there are powerful and the cities are fortified and very large. The descendants of the giant Anak are there," and several hostile people groups occupy regions of the land.

That was a summary of their fact-finding. Then began discussion about what to do. Opinions were sharply divided. One of the spies, the man named Caleb, was enthusiastic about the future, “We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it.”

Unfortunately, most of the men who had explored the land had a completely different opinion. Their opening statement was, “We can’t attack those people; they are stronger than we are.” And from that point on, there was one negative opinion after the other, with not a little exaggeration thrown in to make the negative opinions come across with strong emphasis: “The land devours those living in it.” “All the people there (not just three) are of great size.” “Why, we saw the Nephilim there.” These were creatures who were on earth before Noah’s time, before the flood, mentioned in Genesis chapter 6. Really, did they think they saw some of those creatures? And “We were like grasshoppers before them.”

These men insisted that the promised land was beyond the reach of the people of Israel. They were able to drown out the enthusiasm of Caleb. Caleb was the individual in these verses who took the LORD at His word. He was convinced of the truth of the LORD’s promises. He knew that obstacles such as fortified cities and hostile people groups and even a few giants would not be a problem for the LORD. He didn’t say there weren’t any obstacles — He just believed that God would do what He had promised.

I’m sure that Caleb had a realistic understanding of the difficulties which had to be overcome, but he had confidence in what the LORD was going to do to enable his fellow Israelites to accomplish the task. When, in verse 2, the LORD instructed Moses to “send some men to explore the land of Canaan,” He added the familiar words of assurance, “which I am giving to the Israelites.” It was those words of assurance that Caleb accepted at face value. When he said, “We can certainly take possession of the land,” he was not boasting with a human kind of bravado. He was speaking as a person who really believed that the LORD would give the land to the people.

On the other hand, those spies who exaggerated and distorted and adversely influenced the people were comparing their own natural abilities to the difficulties. They failed to take into account the LORD's supernatural abilities to help them be victorious. They had no confidence in the promises of the LORD, and they had forgotten the remarkable ways in which the LORD had overcome previous obstacles on their behalf, obstacles as significant as the ruler of Egypt, the waters of the Red Sea, an enemy force which attacked them as they were traveling toward Mount Sinai, and the lack of resources in the wilderness areas. Once again the pattern of disobedience and rejection of the instructions of the LORD was exhibited. These spies were unwilling to trust the LORD. And they were guilty of fomenting a great rebellion among the people.

The report of the majority of the spies spread through the entire assembly of the Israelites. "That night all the people of the community raised their voices and wept aloud." No one talked about the promises of the LORD. No one brought up the miracles He had performed. Forgotten was the overwhelming defeat of the most powerful nation on earth which led to their release from bondage.

They became convinced that the LORD had brought them to the border of the promised land only to have them fall by the sword. The text states three times that "all the people," "all the Israelites," "the whole assembly," virtually everyone, was paralyzed with fear. One of the commentators I read described the situation this way, "Fear unchecked becomes its own fuel, a self-propelling force that expands as it expends" (*Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. in Expositor's Bible Commentary*). That's what happened among the Israelites.

The entire community was given over to a form of irrational anger, first, toward the LORD, but also against Moses and Aaron. The more the people wailed, the more excessive became their words. They began to wish that they had died in Egypt, or in the desert, rather than to come so close to the fulfillment of their dreams of a land of their own, only to be told that it was unattainable.

They worked themselves up to the point of convincing themselves to return to Egypt. There was, first, a question: "Wouldn't it be better for us to go back to Egypt? Then the decisive answer, "We should choose a leader and go back to Egypt."

As I said earlier, this message has two parts. Today we have thought about the reaction of the people to their circumstances. Next week we will focus on the LORD's response to the rebellion of the people.

Before we conclude today, we need to make some application of this passage to our lives. In the letter written by the Apostle Paul to the church fellowship in Corinth, he stated that the followers of Jesus need to learn from the mistakes of these Old Testament Israelites. What are some lessons which apply to us?

I can suggest a list of four principles to be kept in mind. First, what God wants to do through us will challenge our faith. Scripture indicates that God has a specific important work assignment for each believer. The best verse to explain this is in Ephesians, chapter 2, "We are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which He prepared in advance for us to do" (*Ephesians 2:10*). Why did He offer salvation to us? So we could be His hands and feet in doing good works. In the case of the Israelites, God raised them up to be a testimony for Him to all the other people groups on the earth.

The second principle: We must trust God for guidance and be obedient to what He tells us to do. Even when the task seems too big for us, we must believe that God will display His power in us. We must believe that His promise and plan will be successfully fulfilled, not because of who we are, but because He will accomplish what He wants through us. We can be His opportunity to display His glory. The Israelite spies should have said, "Taking the land is too big for us, but not for our sovereign God. Let's get on with work; He will help us accomplish whatever is necessary."

The third principle is an extension of the second: We always have a choice when it comes to our obedience to and cooperation with God. We can focus on ourselves — our expectations, our weaknesses, our desires — and seek to satisfy ourselves or we can yield ourselves to God and seek to please Him. Key verses for us to remember are in Matthew. Jesus said, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it" (*Matthew 16:24-25*). The Israelites were so focused on themselves that they forgot the reason they were called to be God's people.

The fourth principle can be stated this way: Those who are obedient will always be blessed. The grumblers and complainers of Israel were dissatisfied. They did not show appreciation for the multiple benefits they received. If they had obeyed at Kadesh they would soon have experienced the “milk and honey” of the land and enjoyed big clusters of grapes. God places before all believers “promised-land type of opportunities,” and He promises to go before us as we engage in those opportunities. He, in fact, urges us to “rise up and take possession of our ‘promised-land opportunities.’” May we be obedient each step, each day of our journey to our heavenly promised land.