

Numbers 13-14

Context

Following preparations for departure from Sinai:

- Should be coming to the climax of the Exodus! But within sight of their goal they want to give it up altogether – 14.1-4. They reject Moses' leadership and God's entire plan.

Ch 10 – Israel leaves Sinai on 20th day of 2nd month in second year
The ark and cloud go before them. Hobab the Midianite goes with them.

Ch 11 – The people complain, the LORD is angry and his fire burns among them, and some on the outskirts of the camp are consumed.
The people cry out to Moses, who intercedes for them so that the fire dies down.

The people crave meat, sick of manna. Have wonderful memories of Egypt: "We remember the fish we ate in Egypt that cost nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions and the garlic. But now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at." (11.5-6).

The anger of the LORD burned hotly and Moses, displeased, grumbles to the LORD about this people. They are his, not Moses! Where is he (Moses) to find meat to feed them all? It's all too much of a burden for him. "Kill me at once!" SOME GRUMBLING OK!

The LORD tells Moses to appoint 70 men of the elders, upon whom he will place a portion of his Spirit, to share the burden. He then says he will feed them meat "until it comes out at your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you, *because you have rejected the LORD* who is among you and have wept before him, saying, "Why did we come out of Egypt?"

Moses questions whether God can really feed 600,000 Israelites meat for a month – even if all the flocks are slaughtered.

The Lord says to Moses, "Is the LORD's hand shortened? Now you shall see whether my word will come true for you or not?"

Moses reports this to the people, appoints the 70 from the elders, upon whom the Spirit alights and they prophesy, as well as on 2 men (Eldad and Medad) whom he hadn't appointed. Joshua is alarmed but Moses is not. God sends quail, but in his anger also send a plague. Many die.

Ch 12 – Miriam and Aaron oppose Moses because he had married a Cushite woman.

Miriam is struck down with leprosy. Aaron appeals to Moses
Moses intercedes and YHWH relents, restoring her after 7 days' banishment.

Chapter 13

vv.1-21 The spies sent into Canaan

One man, a chief, from each tribe (except Levi).

Where to go:

- Negeb
- Hill country

What to spy out:

- The terrain
- Whether the inhabitants are strong or weak, few or many
- Whether the land is good or bad
- Whether the cities are fortified or not
- Whether the land is rich or poor, treed or not

They are to:

- Be of good courage
- Bring some of the fruit of the land

They are away for 40 days and bring back:

- Grapes
- Pomegranates
- Figs

Significant that one of places spied out = Hebron:

- It was near Hebron that God first promised Abraham that he would inherit the land (Gen 13.14-18)
- It was from that area that Abraham set out to defeat the coalition of kings (Gen 14.13ff.)
- It was in Hebron that he purchased land to bury his wife, and where he and the other patriarchs were buried (Gen 23; 25.9; 35.27-29; 50.13).

⇒ Special historical and theological connections

vv.25-33 Report of the spies

The majority report:

- The land is good – flows with milk and honey
- BUT The people are strong
- AND The cities are fortified and large
- AND “we saw the descendants of Anak there – the Amalekites, the Hittites, the Jebusites, the Amorites and the Canaanites.

Caleb:

- Quieted the people and said, “Let us go up at once and occupy it, for we are well able to overcome it.”

The majority respond:

- “We re not able to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we are. So they brought to the people of Israel an *evil* report.” (v.32)
- Exaggerate: “The land... is a land that devours its inhabitants (like Sheol!) and all the people we saw in it are of great height. And there we saw the Nephilim (the sons of Anak, who come form the Nephilim), and we seemed to ourselves like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them.”

Intention = to cement fear.

Chapter 14

vv.1-4 – The people rebel – low point

ALL the people cried out, wept and grumbled against Moses and Aaron.

“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 one will become a prey. Would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt? Let us choose a leader and go back to Egypt.*”

- ⇒ They doubt the goodness of God, and his purposes for them
- ⇒ They choose their own leader, rejecting God’s appointed leader

vv. 5-9 Leaders’ response:

Moses and Aaron fall on their faces, publicly – before the LORD.

Joshua and Caleb tear their clothes and repeat their good report about the land:

“It 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 bread for us. Their protection is removed from them, and the LORD is with us; dop not fear them.”

v. 10 People respond:

Want to stone them.

vv.11-12 The LORD complains 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?” i.e. completely destroy them.

Cf. Exod 32.10

vv.13-19 Moses intercedes for the people (cf. Exod 32.11-14)

- *Think of your reputation.* The Egyptians will hear of it and tell the inhabitants of this land. They will say that you, who have been in the midst of this people by fire and cloud, will say “it was because the LORD was not able to bring this people into the land that he swore to give to them that he killed them in the wilderness.
- *Be true to your character* (see Exod 34.6-7), and your great power (i.e. to forgive) which stands behind it: “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 the 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.”

vv.20-38 God promises judgment

The LORD relents (mostly): “*I have pardoned, according to your word.*

But truly, as I live, and as 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, shall see the land that I swore to give to their fathers. But my servant Caleb, because he has a different spirit, and has followed me fully... turn tomorrow and set out for the wilderness by the way to the Red Sea.” (cf. 11.4-6; 14.3b - wanting to go back to Egypt).

- Wenham: geographically they are to head SE; theologically they are to head back to Egypt.

To Moses and Aaron:

Tell the people that, because of the wicked people's grumbling and despising me, they will get what they've asked for (14.2b): this generation won't go into the Promised land but will die in the wilderness. But their children, whom they said would become a prey (to the Canaanites etc.), will "know the land that you have rejected. (Meanwhile) they will be shepherds in the wilderness forty years and shall suffer for your unfaithfulness."

- V. 34 this wicked generation will *know* (i.e. experience) the LORD's displeasure (v.13)
- V. 31 their children will *know* (i.e. experience) the land

The 10 faithless spies, who had given a false report, are immediately struck down by a plague.

vv. 39-45 Israel defeated in battle

The people mourn when they hear what Moses says, and then rise up early to go into the land the LORD had promised. They presume they will win his forgiveness easily/cheaply. They don't reckon with the seriousness of their sin, or allow Moses to direct them. "We are here!"

Moses reprimands them: the LORD has told them to head south! He will not go with you and you will be struck down.

"But they presumed to go up..." (v.44) – but neither Moses nor the ark nor the LORD went with them.

⇒ Defeat!

1. Take Courage!

- a. Moses, in Deut 1.19-21, retells this story, reminding them that the LORD told them “do not fear or be dismayed.” Cf. Josh 1.6,7,9.
- b. Faith is not an unseeing or ignorant optimism, but sees difficulties from a divine perspective.
- c. Be aware that human fear can distort/blind one to spiritual reality (cf. Gehazzi with Elisha)
- d. See through the eyes of faith/God’s promises, even when ‘realities’ suggest otherwise.
- e. Don’t give/believe a false (or even exaggerated) report!

2. Believe! Fear is tied inseparably to unbelief, which often leads to unfaithfulness/rebellion, in the scriptures – see Heb 3.7-4.13; Peter walking on water

The LORD is on your side and has already won the ultimate victory.

- a. Remember all the LORD has done for you!
- b. Don’t doubt the goodness of God, and his purposes – let alone attribute evil to him! (14.1-3)

The LORD is true to his character, which is gracious and merciful, but sin does have consequences nevertheless.

- c. Presumption/presumptuous action is a sin (14.44). “Here we are!” – we have mourned over night and are now ready to take matters into our own hands, expecting the LORD to be with us.

3. Don’t reject God’s appointed leaders and choose your own (14.4,10)

4. Have a Caleb spirit – 14.24 – “followed me fully”. God likes enthusiasts, like Caleb and Peter!

- a. Those who don’t, don’t inherit God’s promises. None of the generation that came out of Egypt, except Joshua and Caleb, will enter the Promised Land => final break with Egypt.

5. Know that God’s plans cannot be thwarted. Note that in spite of Israelite’s failing, God’s purposes are not thwarted – just delayed.

NB. 14.21 “As truly as I live, and as all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the LORD...” cf. Habbakuk 2.14 and Phil 2.10-11 and Revelation 21.

Suggested Discussion Questions

1. God clearly is open to lament: our crying out to him (as in the Psalms), and Moses complains to God (Num 11.11-15), and God to Moses! (Num 14.11-12). However, grumbling and complaints incur God's displeasure (e.g. Num 11.1; 14.1-4). What is the difference between the two types of crying out? How does the spirit behind them differ?
2. What do you think God means when he commends Caleb in 14.24? How can we have a 'Caleb spirit'?
3. What does it mean for you to 'have courage' and 'not be afraid' – God's repeated command in both the Old and New Testaments?
4. What things make you fearful and may limit the extent to which you are willing to serve God? How do God's promises counter those fears?
5. What things that God has done in your life have strengthened your faith and trust in him?
6. How can we be presumptuous in our walk with God (as the Israelites were in 14.39-45)?