

FAITH ON TRIAL

Numbers 13-14

After the children of Israel had left Egypt, they marched toward the land of Canaan, which long before had been promised to Abraham for an inheritance and to his seed after him. The road which led to Canaan passed through the wilderness, but God was with them to guide them with a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. For them God provided food, drink, clothing and protection from all enemies. God had told them about the excellence of the land, promised them that he would guide them to it, assured them that He would give them possession of it, and then commanded them to take it. This land of sufficiency, safety and satisfaction was set before the Israelites as an outright gift, but it was to become theirs in actual possession through simple faith and obedience.

Naturally one would have expected that, in their eagerness to be the first to set foot on the soil of Canaan, the whole company would have stampeded. However, such was not the case. They seemed as reluctant to enter the Promised Land as the majority of Christians are to embark on the life more abundant.

Instead of doing as God had commanded them, through unbelief the children of Israel failed to go all the way and claim their inheritance. So many Christians are like that today. They make a good start and a fair showing, but fail to go all the way. They refuse to attempt to do what God has commanded them.

Rather than possess the land in obedience to the command of God, when they arrived at the border the Israelites requested Moses to appoint an appraisal committee to spy out the land. A committee of twelve was selected, one man from each of the tribes. Each was a man of distinction, discretion and influence in the tribe over which he presided as a prince. They were chosen because of their physical endurance, quickness of eye, tact in emergencies and good judgment of the land and the people. They were instructed to survey the land, to return with samples of the fruit, and to bring information about the cities and the type of citizens found therein.

After a search of forty days the twelve spies returned to Kadesh-Barnea. They reported that they had found a land of magic charms, luscious fruits, alluvial soil and marvelous advantages, just as God had described it. All of them agreed that the land which they had just explored was well worth possessing. While there was perfect agreement that the land was glorious and desirable, ten of them reported that it was inhabited by such veritable giants and that the cities were so strongly fortified that it would be impossible for the Israelites to take possession of it. What these spies saw, in addition to the fertility of the land, filled their hearts with fear and unbelief. They saw the size of the giants, but they did not recognize the greatness and power of God. If they had looked at the giants through God, they would have appeared very small rather than large. Instead, they compared the giants with themselves and, of course, they appeared to be huge.

Caleb and Joshua submitted a minority report and said, "Let us go up at once, and possess it; for we are well able to overcome it" (Numbers 13:30).

This minority report did not minimize the difficulties, but it did magnify God. The appeal of Caleb and Joshua was an expression of real trust in God. While the majority thought of themselves as "grasshoppers" and of their enemies as "giants," Caleb and Joshua thought of their enemies as "grasshoppers" and of God as the all-sufficient Conqueror.

I. The Dissatisfaction Of The People. Numbers 14:2-3.

1. Disappointment.

No doubt the children of Israel had come to think that the long and hard years in the wilderness were about ended. They anticipated that they would soon be living in the Promised Land. But their dreams and hopes, which they had cherished so long, were suddenly dashed to the ground when they listened to the report of the ten spies. These ten faithless men had led the people astray by exaggerating the real difficulties which existed, and by ignoring the divine aid which they would have had in overcoming them. From this we learn that when God makes plain one's duty it is not right to let the mind dwell on the difficulties to be encountered.

2. Discouragement.

When everything went contrary to the anticipations of the people, their sense of disappointment was followed by discouragement. One of the strongest weapons that Satan uses against the children of God is discouragement. The enemy of our souls never ceases to wield this instrument in hours of crisis and times of strain. Usually a time of success or a moment of high achievement is followed by Satan's use of this his most effective weapon.

3. Despondency.

"The whole congregation said unto them, Would God that we had died in the land of Egypt! or would God we had died in this wilderness!" What has happened to these people, anyway? They had been brave when they started out from Egypt. Now, when they were on the doorstep of triumph, and were ready to step across the boundary into the land that was flowing with milk and honey, which God had promised to give them, they became despondent. In their despondency they estimated death in Egypt or in the wilderness as being preferable to defeat by giants in the land. After weeping all night over the impending danger to themselves and to their families they expressed the wish that death had spared them of that hour. Many look upon death as a means of escaping frustration and hardship.

4. Disobedience.

When those whining cowards submitted their pessimistic and discouraging report to the people there was an immediate outburst of panic and confusion. There was a great consternation among the people. In their fearfulness they refused to advance. God had already given them the land, but they refused to take it. They lacked faith in God and a willingness to obey Him. They had a far greater sense of the difficulties than they had of the presence and the power of God.

The people, fast becoming a frenzied mob, began to look for somebody

on whom they could lay the blame. As is customary with people, they turned against their religious leaders, Moses and Aaron. How unfair and foolish! Moses was their great leader and best friend, and certainly did not deserve this bitter attack, but he received it nevertheless. It is doubtful if any people have ever been blessed more than the Israelites; neither have any ever complained more about the servants of God or murmured more against God Himself than they did.

Feeling sorry for themselves, which is always very unwholesome, the people tried to blame God for the circumstances in which they found themselves. Instead of being grateful to Him for all that God had done for them, they directed their bitter resentment and anger against God's courageous and optimistic servants for bringing them face to face with a task which demanded so much faith, courage and dedication. They criticized Moses and Aaron harshly and unmercifully. Their treatment of these two men of God was in reality a defiance of God Himself. One's attitude toward and treatment of a servant of God is always a clear revelation of one's relationship to God.

II. The Disapproval Of God. Numbers 14:26-33.

As is always the case, God refused to ignore the wrong doing of His people. Their unbelief and defiance of His will made it necessary for Him to withdraw His favor and His blessing from them. Their distrust of God and their disobedience of Him provoked Him greatly. There is always a limit to the patience of God. Man can go just so far and then God will say, "It is enough." A day of reckoning always comes. God does not always punish immediately. Some people can go on in ways of disobedience for a long time without chastisement or punishment. By and by they get to the place where they think God will not do anything about their conduct before Him and their treatment of others. For all such chastisement or punishment is not canceled; it is just delayed. Some day it is sure to come. People may mistreat and abuse the servants of God, but He will never forsake the ones whom He has called into His service and given an assignment. Nothing is any more certain than the fact that divine judgment will befall those who deal unjustly with God's servants.

Recognizing fully that the people had disobeyed God sufficiently for Him to destroy them, Moses still prayed for them. Longing for their welfare, even though they abused him without any justification, Moses earnestly besought God to pardon them for their sinfulness and rebellion. Moses based his plea on the character, the honor, the promises and the mercies of God. He did not want the enemies of God to misrepresent Him by declaring that He did not have the ability to bring the Israelites into the Promised Land.

After the murmurers had disgusted God with their complaints and criticisms, and had expressed a desire to die in the wilderness, He announced that He was going to grant their wish. According to the divine decree, it would be the fate of all the murmurers, who were twenty years of age when they left Egypt, to wander in the wilderness until death overtook them. Complaining about God's dealings and rebelling against His will are sins which He will never ignore. Indulgence in either is sure to bring chastisement to God's children.

III. The Distinction Of The Two Spies. Numbers 14:36-38.

In due time the adult members of the tribes of Israel passed away. The wilderness in which they had wandered had claimed their remains, with two

exceptions. Caleb and Joshua had survived. Hence we have in Joshua 14:10 the grateful exclamation by Caleb, "Behold, the Lord hath kept me alive." We need to read into this word "alive" something more than physical survival. Caleb had been kept alive in mind, in vision and in spirit. Too many of us go on breathing after we have stopped living. Not so with Caleb!

Caleb and Joshua distinguished themselves from the other ten spies by their reports and by the difference in their attitude and that of the others with reference to complying with God's expressed desire as to what they should do. Consequently, God made a distinction between them and the others in that He permitted them to enter the Promised Land and did not allow the others to do so on account of their unbelief and disobedience. We admire Caleb and Joshua for their great faith in God and their obedience to Him. Their courage, optimism, hope and dedication are worthy of our emulation.

God's Word says, "Hebron therefore became the inheritance of Caleb, ... because that he wholly followed the Lord God of Israel" (Joshua 14:14). This leads me to exclaim, Caleb, you have done us much good. You have shamed us by your example of faithfulness. Our own unfaithfulness rises up to smite us and make us blush. But your example has done something more: it has lighted a big, bright lamp of encouragement in our souls. We too can leave our falterings and half-loyalties behind. We too can give God the full measure of our dedication and devotion. The Christian must have the Holy Spirit possessing him, purifying him and controlling him if he is to give God the "last full measure of devotion."