

Forward in Faith or Retreating in Rejection

Numbers 14:20-45

Two of the greatest missionaries to this beautiful land of ours and neighbouring Botswana were Robert and Mary Moffat. Arriving in 1816, they worked tirelessly among the Tswana people for decades. He translated the entire Bible, many hymns and Pilgrim's Progress into Setswana.

But they did not see much fruit for many years. For at least a decade, they saw no converts, to the point where the directors of the mission board doubted whether the work should continue. The Moffats felt grieved at the thought of going, and they laboured on for another two years, with no converts.

Then one day, a friend in England wrote to them, asking what gift she might buy them and mail them. Mrs Moffat wrote back: "Send us a communion set. I'm sure it will soon be needed."

A communion set? Why ask for a communion set if they did not have a single believer?

But faith honours God and God honours faith. Soon, there were six believers that came to Christ, forming the first church of that area. The communion set from England was delayed in the mail; but on the very day before the first commemoration of the Lord's Supper in, the set arrived.

Faith honours God and God honours faith. The work of God never goes forward unless it moves forward in faith. One of the most powerful pictures of faith and unbelief is our Scripture today in Numbers 13 and 14, a major turning point in the life of Israel. So significant was this event that it became the theme of several psalms, and a major theme in the book of Hebrews. Because in a very vivid form, it shows us what faith and unbelief are really like: one moves forward in trust, the other draws back in rejection.

Here is a truth which touches every one of us. No one can exempt himself from the demand of faith. Hebrews 11:6 tells us that without faith it is impossible to please Him. Hebrews 10:38 tells us that if any man draw back, my soul shall have no pleasure in him. Whether it is dealing with your own spiritual growth, or a major life decision, or the need for more ministry, or more evangelism to take place, there is no neutral spot. We go forward, or we go backward.

In this account, we'll see the situation that faced Israel, the choices they made, and the consequences of those choices. Through it, we'll see a vivid illustration of our own lives, as individuals, as families, and as a church.

I. God's People Faced Possibilities and Problems

Exactly twenty four months after leaving Egypt, Israel arrives at Kadesh. Twelve choice men, one man from each tribe is selected, and they are sent in to the land that Israel has been marching towards. They have forty days to spy out this land, from top to bottom. Off these men go, looking at the forests, the land and its fertility, the cities of the inhabitants. They do as Moses says.

As these men spend those five and a half weeks in Canaan, each of them sees two facts about the land that exist simultaneously. They see great possibilities, and they see great problems.

The possibilities had to do with the land itself. It was clearly incredibly rich and fertile, better than anything they had been used to in Egypt. They bring back a cluster of grapes so large it requires two of

these athletic men to carry it on a pole. The men agree that it is a land 'flowing with milk and honey'. That phrase was first used by God to describe Canaan. He used it four times in the book of Exodus, once in Leviticus, and several times more later on in the book of Deuteronomy. Both honey and milk are sweet and luxurious items, but items you get in smaller amounts – one beehive at a time, one milked cow at a time. If a land is almost flowing with them, it means the land is bursting with abundance. The few million people of Israel would have not just enough, but more than enough, and to spare.

But there were other possibilities. The land was filled with already-built houses, already-built cities. Instead of having to begin from scratch, cutting stones, mixing mortar, the Israelites would be able to occupy towns that they had not built, farms they had not planted, all kinds of technologies and infrastructure they had not made. Israel would have a head-start unheard of: enter an abundant land, and simply take over from the inhabitants who have been driven out.

But then there were problems. the problems were the inhabitants. They were numerous, they were established, and they were large. Giants, it seemed to the Israelites. Some of them lived in militarised cities – high walls, containing garrisons of soldiers, and well-defended. And they were not going to invite Israel to come in and take over their farms and lands and cities. That meant conflict, bloodshed, and the pain and horror of war. To get to the possibilities of the land, Israel would have to face the problems.

Only the childish and the naïve expect to get possibilities without problems. We would all love progress without problems, pleasure without problems, profit without problems, but there is no such thing, in this world. Solomon told us that in Proverbs:

Proverbs 14:4 ⁴ *Where no oxen are, the trough is clean; But much increase comes by the strength of an ox.*

In other words, you want a nice clean barn? Sure, don't have any animals in there. But if you want the benefits of ox to plough your farm or pull your cart, then expect to have a stinky, messy barn. No increase without some mess, some problems.

But some imagine a world where they can get privileges without responsibility, benefits without sacrifice, progress without trouble - that's a dream world.

And if that was true for Israel possessing Canaan, it's true for every Christian seeking a deeper walk with Christ. Canaan is not a picture of Heaven; Canaan is a picture of the abundant Christian life, the victorious Christian life. From where you stand, you look at descriptions of the abundant Christian life, and it has huge possibilities. You read books like Ephesians and you see a life filled with God's felt presence; a life strengthened by the Holy Spirit; a life where He illuminates Scripture to you; a life where you are an active and useful member of the body of Christ, where your character puts off the old ways and puts on the new. A life where husbands and wives live in Christlike union; where parents and children live in Christlike union; where employers and employees live in Christlike union; where you take up the whole armour of God and stand against the enemy. This Spirit-filled life, where you sing in your heart and give thanks continually and walk worthy of your calling, is a rich, abundant life, a life flowing with milk and honey.

But there are problems ahead. If you pursue that life, you will face opposition. Your own flesh will

resist you every day. Satan will seek to discourage you, intimidate you, deceive you. People will oppose your commitment and give you reasons against it. You will enter trials that will painfully burn off the dross from your golden faith. You will learn of the ugliness of your own sin and have to wrestle with it. God will call for a surrender of what is precious to you, and ask you to put your Isaac on the altar.

Planting a church has problems, and possibilities. Starting a ministry in the church to the youth, to married couples, to singles, to the elderly has problems and possibilities. Getting involved in evangelising Jews and Gentiles has problems and possibilities. Training pastors to minister in townships and locations has problems and possibilities. Starting a Christian school has problems and possibilities. Getting married has problems and possibilities. Having children has problems and possibilities.

So as you stand there, deciding whether you should go forward in faith, or retreat to what you know, what ought to make the difference? How do you decide if the problems are bigger than the possibilities, or if the possibilities make the problems worth it?

Let me show you the two responses, and how they came to those conclusions.

II. Some Chose Unbelief and Rejection; Some Chose Faith and Submission

The first response is the response of the ten spies, which then became the response of the entire adult population of Israel.

Numbers 13:31 - 14:4 *But 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." ³² And they gave the children of Israel a bad report of the land which they had spied out, saying, "The land through which we have gone as spies is a land that devours its inhabitants, and all the people whom we saw in it are men of great stature. ³³ "There we saw the giants (the descendants of Anak came from the giants); and we were like grasshoppers in our own sight, and so we were in their sight." NKJ*
Numbers 14:1 *So all the congregation lifted up their voices and cried, and the people wept that night. ² And all the children of Israel complained against Moses and Aaron, and the whole congregation said to them, "If only we had died in the land of Egypt! Or if only we had died in this wilderness! ³ "Why has the LORD brought us to this land to fall by the sword, that our wives and children should become victims? Would it not be better for us to return to Egypt?" ⁴ So they said to one another, "Let us select a leader and return to Egypt."*

How do these people look at the possibilities and the problems? They see the problems as dominating. The size of the people, the strength of the people is overwhelming to them, it makes the possibilities pale by comparison. So much so, that they wish for death right there, rather than facing the inevitable war with the inhabitants of the land. To the point that they make this fateful statement: Let us select a leader and return to Egypt.

Perhaps they would seek to excuse their actions on account of fear: the Canaanites were intimidating in appearance. Perhaps they would seek to excuse their decision to go back based on weakness: they were small and untrained as an army. Perhaps they would excuse their action by blaming Moses and Aaron and say it was their poor leadership that they were objecting to.

But look how God comments on their actions:

Numbers 14:11 *¹¹ Then the LORD said to Moses: "How long will these people reject Me? And how long will*

they not believe Me, with all the signs which I have performed among them?

God did not ask, how long will they be weak, or how long will they be fearful; He asked, how long will they not believe me? What was the root problem behind their magnifying of the problems over the possibilities? Unbelief. Rejection of what God had said.

You see, as they looked at the possibilities, and the problems, something should have tipped the scale towards embracing the possibilities. And what was that thing? What should have been uppermost in their minds?

The promises of God. At least nine times God explicitly says he is going to bring Israel into the land. In fact, many of the times, God gave laws which assumed they would be in the land. He says things like, When you enter the land, and harvest its produce, you shall bring an offering of first-fruits – assuming they would be in the land. Much of the whole code of Moses assumed they would be in the land – why would God give it if He expected them to be slaughtered by the Canaanites.

Not only did God assure them He was taking them in, and set up a law that assumed they would go in, He even told them how He would deal with those inhabitants.

Exodus 23:29-31 ⁹ *"I will not drive them out from before you in one year, lest the land become desolate and the beast of the field become too numerous for you. ³⁰ "Little by little I will drive them out from before you, until you have increased, and you inherit the land. ³¹ "And I will set your bounds from the Red Sea to the sea, Philistia, and from the desert to the River. For I will deliver the inhabitants of the land into your hand, and you shall drive them out before you.*

If that were not enough, Israel had been slaves to the most powerful empire in the world at the time - Egypt. God had done the equivalent of walking into a maximum security prison, dealing with all the guards, ripping off the bars of the jail, leading out the prisoners and making sure that anyone who tried to re-capture them was destroyed as well. He did this when Egypt was at its peak of power. Israel had past grace, and promises of future grace.

But Israel had always had a problem with walking by sight. They complained when at the Red Sea, and God delivered them. They complained when on the other side about having no water, and God opened up water in the desert. They complained about having no food in the desert, and God sent manna. They complained about not having meat in the desert, and God sent quails.

So we can understand why the Lord asks, And how long will they not believe Me, with all the signs which I have performed among them?

But if God had said it, and given them promises, what were Israel saying about God with this action? What were they saying about His nature? What were they saying about His ability? They were calling Him a liar. They were rejecting not just His promises but Him – because His Word is just Him in action!

We know what this is like. We have all kinds of New Testament promises: promises of His abiding presence, promises of all grace to meet every ministry need. But what we can do, if we fall into the trap of the Israelites, is that we come to the problem we are facing, and we decide that the promises of God somehow do not apply, or do not apply in enough detail to our situation. We know broadly speaking

that what we want to do is in the will of God, there is wisdom in it, there is huge blessing in it, but we look at the problems until we feel like grasshoppers at their feet.

Charles Spurgeon described this kind of practical atheism this way: “We know that God both can and will keep his promises as a rule but for certain reasons we doubt whether he will keep his word to us...” “We can believe anything of God but that which it is the most necessary for us to believe. We believe all other words but that very one which we are most called upon to credit. Strange faith, which will exert itself everywhere but where it is wanted!

Which of the Israelites could point to the time when God's promises had failed? And which of us could record the time and day when God failed to honour His own Word, failed to keep His faithful promises to His own children? Why do we think it will be different for the next step?

Look at the simple, but strong faith of Joshua and Caleb by contrast.

Numbers 13:30 ³⁰ Then Caleb quieted the people before Moses, and said, "Let us go up at once and take possession, for we are well able to overcome it."

Numbers 14:6-9 But Joshua the son of Nun and Caleb the son of Jephunneh, who were among those who had spied out the land, tore their clothes; ⁷ and they spoke to all the congregation of the children of Israel, saying: "The land we passed through to spy out is an exceedingly good land. ⁸ "If the LORD delights in us, then He will bring us into this land and give it to us, 'a land which flows with milk and honey.' ⁹ "Only do not rebel against the LORD, nor fear the people of the land, for they are our bread; their protection has departed from them, and the LORD is with us. Do not fear them."

Now what did Joshua and Caleb know that the others did not know? Did they know exactly how God would drive out the inhabitants? Did they have some secret knowledge that showed them how God would bring down the walls of Jericho; or use hornets to cause the Canaanites to abandon their own towns; or how He would use fear to spread through the land, causing many to voluntarily flee; or how God would give supernatural aid during the battles? No, they did not know the exact details of how God would bring these things about. He seldom gives His servants those details.

It is not wrong for God's people to plan, and to organise and even to make detailed plans. But when God's people draw back, because they cannot see how God is going to implement His own promises, that is unbelief.

How is He going to provide musicians, counsellors, teachers, and disciples? How is He going to break that hard heart you are thinking of witnessing to? How is He going to open doors for a mercy ministry? How can He bring in more people and yet keep us loving one another and meeting each other's needs? How can He provide the money needed to further ministry efforts?

One night, a fire broke out in a house, and the boy caught inside could only flee to the roof. The father seeing, his son, called out to him, "Son, Jump to me, and I will catch you!" He knew that the house was on the verge of collapse. But on the top of that house, the son could only see flames and smoke. His father kept calling on him to jump. His son shouted back, "Daddy, I can't jump. I can't see you!" His father called back, " But I can see you, and that's all that matters."

You don't need to know all the details of how it will happen, to trust God that it will and that it should. Caleb and Joshua didn't have a thirty-step implementation plan. They had the memories of past grace;

the promises of future grace; the direct command of God, and no reason to doubt God's ability. With that in mind, even giant soldiers, fortified cities and iron chariots became little in their eyes.

This is not the prosperity gospel, where you have faith in your faith, so as to get the money and health you want. This is faith in the character of God, to achieve His purposes, for His glory on the earth, and for us to be willing co-labourers with Him, going forward, not backward.

Hebrews 10:38-39 ³⁸ *Now the just shall live by faith; But if anyone draws back, My soul has no pleasure in him.* ³⁹ *But we are not of those who draw back to perdition, but of those who believe to the saving of the soul.*

This is serious, because in Numbers we also see the two consequences of this unbelief in some, and the faith in others - Caleb and Joshua.

III. God Chastened Unbelief with its Own Fruit, God Rewarded Faith With Sight

Numbers 14:22-34 ²² *"because all these men who have seen My glory and the signs which I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and have put Me to the test now these ten times, and have not heeded My voice, ²³ "they certainly shall not see the land of which I swore to their fathers, nor shall any of those who rejected Me see it. ²⁴ "But My servant Caleb, because he has a different spirit in him and has followed Me fully, I will bring into the land where he went, and his descendants shall inherit it.*

²⁸ *"Say to them, 'As I live,' says the LORD, 'just as you have spoken in My hearing, so I will do to you: ²⁹ 'The carcasses of you who have complained against Me shall fall in this wilderness, all of you who were numbered, according to your entire number, from twenty years old and above. ³⁰ 'Except for Caleb the son of Jephunneh and Joshua the son of Nun, you shall by no means enter the land which I swore I would make you dwell in. ³¹ 'But your little ones, whom you said would be victims, I will bring in, and they shall know the land which you have despised. ³² 'But as for you, your carcasses shall fall in this wilderness. ³³ 'And your sons shall be shepherds in the wilderness forty years, and bear the brunt of your infidelity, until your carcasses are consumed in the wilderness. ³⁴ 'According to the number of the days in which you spied out the land, forty days, for each day you shall bear your guilt one year, namely forty years, and you shall know My rejection.*

Once Israel hears of this, they do an about-face and now tell Moses they are ready to go in. But it is too late. They even attempt to go in and are defeated by Amalekites.

God says to these people: You said it was impossible to go in, then your punishment shall be to not go in. You shall not die by the sword, but of old age, as I sustain you for forty years in the wilderness.

Let us be warned by this fact - that there is a limit to the long-suffering of God, and especially when it is tried by distrust. He may bear with unbelief for a time and, blessed be his name, for a long time, for He remembers that we are dust; but when it comes to wilful perseverance in unbelief the Lord will not for ever be thus provoked. It behoves us to listen to the words of Paul: "Let us therefore fear, lest, a promise being left us of entering into his rest, any of you should seem to come short of it."

Here's the great tragedy of unbelief: you only see those things which you said you would see. You doubt what you cannot see, and so God leaves you to see only what you said exists. Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. Unbelief does not hope, does not trust in the unseen, so it must live with its own narrow horizons. Unbelief will never step out to the uncharted, so it must simply circle its familiar surroundings. Unbelief must sleep in its own bed.

But faith gets to enter into what it hoped for, what it looked for. Caleb and Joshua both entered the land, and saw the victories, the miracles, and the promises come into the present.

God brings our families and churches to crisis points. It is really as if each of us faces a choice: go forward - to more ministry, more evangelism, more Christlikeness, with all the problems and trials that come with those and all the promises God gives us, or try to avoid problems and pains by drawing back, retreating, settling back into complacency, stagnation, ease, and faithlessness.

But this passage warns us: drawing back is not really the better path. It has pains too, and they are worse. The losses of faith are temporary; the losses of unbelief are permanent. The gains of unbelief are temporary, the gains of faith are permanent.