

September 21, 2025

THE LAND: NUMBERS 13:17-31

Introductory Activity

Ask: “What was the last project you had that was more complicated than you thought it would be?” (ETB PSG, 28)

Read or relate the information in the opening paragraph on page 28 of the Personal Study Guide. (See Notes Box)

Today, we are going to see the Israelites get halfway through a project and refuse to complete it because of the perceived difficulties ahead.

SKIP TO TRANSITION BELOW

Introductory Activity Options 2

Explain: On September 6, 2025, the Los Angeles Dodgers were playing the Baltimore Orioles. At the bottom of the eighth inning, the Dodgers were up 3-0. At that point, Dodger’s pitcher Yoshinobu Yamamoto had pitched a no-hitter. Things fell apart in the ninth inning. The Orioles were last at bat. The Dodgers had secured 2 outs, and things looked finished. Then Jackson Holliday of the Orioles broke the no-hitter with a home run. Blake Treinen replaced Yamamoto on the mound. Treinen allowed a double, hit a batter, threw a wild pitch, and allowed a few walks. He, in turn, was replaced by Tanner Scott, who did not do much better. In the end, the Dodgers allowed four runs in the last inning of the game. With a 4-3 defeat, they snatched defeat from the jaws of victory.¹

Today, we are going to see the Israelites snatch defeat from the jaws of victory in the final inning of their trip to the Promised Land.

Transition: Last week, we left the Israelites on their trip from Sinai to Canaan. They were following the cloud, but they also suffered from bouts of complaining and rebellion against Moses and the Lord. Nevertheless, the Lord led the 2 million or so people on a two-month journey to the edge of the Promised Land (c.f. TOTC, 132). Our lesson today will pick up in Numbers 13:17. Prior to this, the Lord had instructed Moses to send scouts into the land (v. 1). As we study the lesson, we will see how the Israelites responded to challenging circumstances. Their response will remind us that “God requires obedient faith in the face of fear.” (ETB PSG, 28) When we remember that, we will finish well and achieve victory in life.

1. THE TASK OUTLINED (NUM. 13:17-20)

Read (or have someone read) Numbers 13:17-20.

Notes:

This Lesson was created using:

- *Explore the Bible Leader Guide* (ETB LG)
- *Explore the Bible Personal Study Guide* (ETB PSG)
- *Explore the Bible Commentary* (ETBC)
- *Preaching the Word: Numbers* (Preaching)
- *Exalting Jesus in Numbers* (Exalting)
- *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries: Numbers* (TOTC)
- *Numbers* (Harrison)
- *New American Commentary: Numbers* (NAC)

“Have you ever noticed how a project grows? You decide to clean out the backyard shed, the garage, or the closet. You are going to put down new liner paper in the kitchen cabinets. You are going to paint the kids’ bedroom. You figure out how long it will take and can visualize what it will look like when you’re finished. You begin—excited. But about halfway through, you say, “What was I thinking? This is a lot more complicated than I thought it would be.” (ETB PSG, 28)

¹ Iain Duguid titled his chapter on Numbers 13 “Snatching Defeat from the Jaws of Victory” in *Numbers: God’s Presence in the Wilderness*.

Explain: This passage teaches us some essential truths about our spiritual lives and our ministry in the world and as servants in the church.

First, **Our Spiritual Development Requires Work.** Someone reading this passage might ask why they needed to spy out the land. In verse 2, the Lord spoke to Moses and said, “Send men to scout out the land of Canaan I am giving to the Israelites.” The reception of the land by the people was guaranteed. The Lord was speaking in the present tense: I *am* giving. There was no question about their taking the land. So again, we ask why send in spies. If possessing the land was a forgone conclusion, why did they not just send eviction notices to each town in the land and tell them to leave? They sent in spies because God expected them to do the work of conquering the land. They would have to fight. The spies would help them know how to move forward.

Discuss: In what ways does the Christian life require work?

Application: When a person comes to faith in Christ, they are pronounced righteous in the sight of God. Moreover, they are promised eventual glorification and the elimination of sin in eternity. However, in the everyday life of the believer, he or she still struggles with sin and the reality of living in a sinful world. The work of the Spirit in our lives to bring us more in alignment with Christlikeness is called sanctification. The sanctification process requires work. It takes work to manage our emotions and temptations. It takes work to practice the spiritual disciplines like prayer, study, and stewardship. Christlikeness is a foregone conclusion. God is giving us that. However, while we are alive, we must do the work of moving toward God’s best.

Second, **Our Ministry Requires Forethought.** Moses did not simply send the 10 scouts on a long hike through Canaan. He sent them on a mission to scout out the land and bring back information. The focus of their mission was the land and the people. Are the people strong or weak, few or many? Do they live in fortified cities or small encampments? Is the land “good or bad?” Is it “fertile or unproductive?” Are there trees in the land? Moses needed them to gather this information because Moses did not know the answer to the question. Moreover, their report would either prove or disprove the veracity of God’s description of the land.

On the first point: obtaining knowledge, we should remember the limitations of the people in the ancient world. They could not pull up Google Street View and see the fortifications of Jericho. They could not log into the governmental census records to determine the fighting-age population of Hebron. They simply did not know the facts. The spies would provide that information. On the second point regarding the veracity of God’s promise, Moses believed the promise of God that the land was flowing with milk and honey. However, as the people of Israel have demonstrated time and again, they did not always believe the promises of God. The report from the spies

Notes:

God promised the land, “all they had to do was receive it as a gift. Nonetheless, any major military undertaking requires good intelligence so that the best strategy can be evaluated. God’s promise did not eliminate the need for responsible action.” (Preaching, 167)

would bolster their commitment to do the work required in conquering the land.

Discuss: In what ways does a believer's personal ministry a church's ministry require forethought?

Application: Our ministry in the world, the home, and the church requires forethought. The people of Israel had been promised that they would win the battles and take the land. However, they still had to fight the battles, and it would have been irresponsible for the leadership to send them into battle without a plan based on data. In your ministry in the home, accurate data is helpful. Knowing the challenges that your children face related to media and technology is important. Knowing their friends and their friends' families is important. This information will enable parents to better fight *for* their children. In the world and the workplace, it is important to understand what is happening with culture so that you can respond in a Christlike and Spirit-filled manner. In the church, it is important to act on data. Ministries are led and empowered by the Spirit. Nevertheless, churches and ministries in the church should collect information like demographics of the community, attendance trends, and spiritual and temporal needs of the congregation. Church leaders and servants in the church can more effectively meet the needs of the church body and the community when they have facts and data.

Third, **Both Our Spiritual Development And Our Ministry Service Require Courage.** In concluding his instructions to the spies, Moses tells them to be courageous. As they head into the land, they will encounter some dangers. We know that 40 years after this point, when the people again approached the land, their arrival was well known, and the people of the land feared them. We can assume the same is true at this point. It had been two years since the miraculous and wondrous events took place in Egypt. Now that the same people were on the move *toward* Canaan, we can be sure the people of Canaan were watching the situation closely and were afraid of the 2 million people on their doorstep. The spies might have been a little apprehensive about going into the land. Moses literally told them to "make yourselves strong." (ETB LG, 38)

Discuss: In what ways does the Christian life require courage?

Application: Our spiritual development requires courage. A believer who chooses to follow the Lord in their personal decision-making will face opposition. One encouraging aspect of the believer's life is that he or she does not need to make *himself* or *herself* strong. Instead, the Spirit-filled believer can rely on the Spirit to make them strong when taking stands for holiness and against wickedness. Moreover, our ministry service will require courage. When we step up to a new or challenging ministry opportunity, we might face feelings of inadequacy. Sometimes we might face pushback from others when the ministry is new or different. In these situations, we can rely on the Spirit to give us courage.

Notes:

Summarize Transition: As the people of God stand at the cusp of taking the land, Moses begins the process of preparing them for the work ahead. He is doing so with information and forethought. He is also doing his part as a leader to move forward in God's plan for the nation. Let's see what the spies do when they go into the land.

2. THE LAND ASSESSED (NUM. 13:21-25)

Read (or have someone read) Numbers 13:21-25.

Explain: We might read this passage and wonder how it can offer any edification to the modern reader. In reality, this passage reveals to us the greatness of God and the greatness of His promise to Abraham and his descendants. We can see three things: The greatness of the land, the greatness of the people, and the greatness of the possibility.

The greatness of the land: The passage provides an overview of the geographic scope of the spies' journey that reveals the greatness of the land. We see that they travelled from the Wilderness of Zin, south of what would be Israel, to the southern reaches of Syria (Hamath), just north of Israel. Their 40 days of travel would have spanned over 300 miles of terrain. (c.f. ETB LG, 30) The Lord was not giving the people one city or a small patch of land. He was providing a great expanse to the nation.

The greatness of the people: The passage also provides an overview of the people in the nation that reveals their greatness. The report by the spies in the next passage will highlight the variety of people in the land. In verse 22, the text makes mention of the descendants of Anak. "Known as 'Anakim' (which means 'long-necked' or 'strong-necked'), the relatives of... were giant people related to the Nephilim (Gen. 6:4) and would have presented a significant challenge to conquering the land—a fact ten scouts later pointed out (Num. 13:33)." (ETB LG, 40) The text also makes a point of highlighting Hebron. This city had a long heritage, and the comparison to Zoan of Egypt underscores the city's greatness. This city is of particular importance to the people of Israel. Abram (Abraham) spent time near the city (Gen. 13:18). Hebron is also near the location of the cave purchased by Abraham for the burial of Sarah, his wife (Gen. 23:3ff). The cave later became the burial place for other patriarchs of the nation (Gen. 49:29ff). The cave is the only piece of property purchased by Abraham in the land of promise. As they spent time near the city, the spies "should have been reminded once again of God's promise to give this land to Abraham and his descendants and of God's faithfulness in fulfilling his promise thus far." (Preaching, 168)

The greatness of the possibility: Lastly, the narrative reveals the great possibilities of the land. Moses had instructed the spies to determine if the land was "good or bad." In answer to the question, the spies brought back produce from the land. Their agricultural examples do indeed reveal that the land is good!

Notes:

"There [Hebron] they should have been reminded once again of God's promise to give this land to Abraham and his descendants and of God's faithfulness in fulfilling his promise thus far." (Preaching, 168)

Discuss: One of the purposes of the spies' trip was to reveal the greatness of God and His promise. How is the greatness of God and the greatness of His promises revealed today?

Explain: The greatness of God and His promises are revealed in Scripture. They are also revealed in the lives of His people. As believers live Christian live Christlike lives that broadcast the work of God in their lives, others will see His greatness and proof of His great promises. The testimony of a changed Christian and the testimony of God's ongoing work in the believer's life reveal to a lost and dying world the greatness of God.

Summarize and Transition: In Exodus 3:8, God promised Moses that he would deliver the enslaved people to "a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey." Stuart states that God "promised to bring them to a place ample in both size and nourishment for them."² The account of the spies' sortie into the land reveals that God was keeping his promise. The land was spacious, and the land was able to provide nourishment. The promise in Exodus also reveals the people groups from whom God was redeeming that land. That too is realized in the experience of the spies and reported back to the nation in Numbers 13:29. The scouting trip was meant to provide information that would give practical and spiritual nourishment to the people. It was to provide practical information related to the invasion. Spiritual nourishment was to come by way of a demonstration of God's faithfulness to provide a great land for the people. However, that is not what resulted from the trip.

3. THE DECISION AT HAND (NUMBERS 13:26-31)

Read or have someone read Numbers 13:26-31

Explain: Numbers chapter 14 relates one of the saddest events in the history of Israel. In the opening passages of chapter 14, the people refuse to follow the Lord into the Promised Land. However, like we saw previously when the people complained and rebelled against the Lord, the decision not to enter the land began with a few faithless individuals. In verses 26 and 27, the spies bring their report. In so doing, they reveal the greatness of the land. The land is what the Lord had promised. However, we can see a hint of what is to follow in their report. In verse 27, they fail to mention the Lord. In their recounting, they "went into the land where you [Moses] sent us." They also mention the great nutritious possibilities, but they fail to mention the Lord's promise of such. Their faithlessness becomes even clearer in verses 28 and 29, in which they list the great peoples of the land. This should not have been a surprise since the Lord had told them the land was inhabited

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"The majority completely left God out of the equation. They described the land they toured as 'the land to which you [Moses] sent us' (13:27), not the land the Lord is giving us (compare 13:2)." (Preaching, 170)

"However, ten of the scouts saw major problems that outweighed the benefits and bounty of the land." (ETBC, 37)

"Joshua and Caleb, however, looked at precisely the same facts but from the perspective of faith, not unbelief." (Preaching, 170)

"They saw the same warriors as the majority did, protected by the same city walls, and yet concluded that those pagan nations not only could be but must be defeated." (Preaching, 170)

"If you fear the Lord, you will be free from the fear of your enemies; if you forget God, you will inevitably fear men." (Preaching, 170)

² Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus*, vol. 2, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2006), 117.

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(Ex. 3:8b). Instead of focusing on the Lord's promise of an inheritance, they focused on the strength of the people and their large, fortified cities.

Discuss: In what types of situations might a believer focus on the challenges instead of God's promises? In what types of situations might a church focus on the challenges and ignore the promises and strength of the Lord?

Explain: Life can bring us into situations that result in fear. The Lord, too, can bring us into a situation that might prove fearful. That is the nature of life and the nature of truly following the Lord. The believer lives behind enemy lines, and the Lord calls us to wage battle against the darkness around us. We battle for our own sanctification. We battle for the spiritual lives of our families and those around us. Moreover, the Lord calls the church to be his outpost in enemy territory. If we are going to "take land" for the Kingdom, the local church will be challenged to do hard things and take challenging steps forward. In those times when the challenges seem to be too much for the local body, we should remember that the Lord will care for us and provide what we need to move forward in Kingdom advancement. That is what Caleb tries to remind the people of in verse 30.

Reread: verses 30 (see notes box)

Explain: Caleb, along with Joshua, reiterates this thought in Numbers 14:7b-9. (Read Numbers 4:7b-9; See Notes Box)

The facts regarding the land were not in dispute. Both sides agreed that the land was great, and the people were great. The dispute revolved around the greatness of God! The majority opinion among the spies revealed their decision to deny the greatness of God. They said, "We can't attack the people because they are stronger than we are!" Joshua and Caleb did not even dispute this fact, but they were firm in their belief that God was greater.

Summarize and Transition: Like many committees, the spies were unable to agree on a pathway forward. Unlike a committee, though, it was not their decision to move forward. Nor was it in the prevue of the people to make such a decision. God was already giving them the land. The spies' purpose was to provide information that would inform the manner in which the people took the land. Their report affirmed the greatness of God's promised land, but their report also revealed their fear of the challenges before them.

CONCLUDE

The faithless fear of the 10 spies spilled over into the camp. As we will see next week, this had terrible consequences for the people. By refusing to follow the Lord into the land, they snatched defeat from the jaws of victory. Let us pray and ask us to be a people who faithful in face of fear.

Guide and challenge: Guide the group to page 36 of their Personal Study Guide and ask them to prayerfully consider the second question on the page.

Notes:

Numbers 13:30

³⁰ Then Caleb quieted the people in the presence of Moses and said, "Let's go up now and take possession of the land because we can certainly conquer it!"

"The land we passed through and explored is an extremely good land. ⁸ If the Lord is pleased with us, he will bring us into this land, a land flowing with milk and honey, and give it to us. ⁹ Only don't rebel against the Lord, and don't be afraid of the people of the land, for we will devour them. Their protection has been removed from them, and the Lord is with us. Don't be afraid of them!"

"Like many committees, they couldn't reach a consensus and so returned with a majority and a minority report. The facts were not at issue between the two sides. Everyone agreed, on the one hand, that the land was fertile and prosperous and, on the other, that its inhabitants were a powerful force to be reckoned with." (Preaching, 169)

"The first-hand details about the residents of the land gave the spies' report a touch of authority, and no doubt helped to convince the people of the impossibility of the conquest. But at the same time, they obliquely, but totally, challenged the divine promises." (TOTC, 134)

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("What act of obedience have you been delaying because you thought it would become too difficult? What steps do you need to take to move you closer to beginning that undertaking? What will you do this week to move you forward?")