

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, April 15, 2018**

## **THE CONSEQUENCES OF UNBELIEF**

### **Numbers 13-14**

The biblical account of the scouting expedition into the Promised Land of Canaan and the response of the people of Israel to the report of the 12 explorers (or spies) takes up two full chapters in the Book of Numbers: Numbers 3 and 14. We will read only a portion of the story from Numbers 13, but will look at the story of this epic fail in the history of the people of Israel in its totality. Let's give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God's holy Word as we find it in Numbers 13, beginning with the verse numbered 1.

[Read Numbers 13:1-3, 17-21, 25-33.]

There is more to the story, as you will see. This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

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The Book of Numbers is called the Book of Numbers because of the two "numberings" or censuses of the people of Israel it contains. The first census takes place at the beginning of the book, in Numbers 1, a little more than a year after the exodus from Egypt. The second census takes place almost 40 years later, in Numbers 26, as the people of Israel are about to enter the Promised Land, nearly 40 years after the events which are described in Numbers 13 and 14.

The main focus of the Book of Numbers is on the events that took place between the first census and the second. It is, essentially, a history of the wilderness experiences of the children of Israel. In fact, the Hebrew title of the Book is: "In the Wilderness", which is taken from Numbers 1:1. Even though the time period covered in Numbers is almost 40 years, the content of the book includes only events that occurred in year 2 and year 40 of the Israelites' time in the wilderness.

If you know the history of the people of Israel in Old Testament times, you know that little more than a year after leaving Egypt under the leadership of Moses, the nation of Israel has arrived at the southern edge of Canaan, the land God has promised to give them. But it would be 40 years from the time of the exodus before they could enter the Promised Land. Why the delay? The answer is given in the New Testament, in Hebrews 3:19, which says it was "because of their unbelief." An entire generation of Israelites was disqualified from entering the Promised Land because of their unbelief. Because of their unbelief in the power and sufficiency of God. Because of their unwillingness to trust God to do for them what He had promised to do. They forfeited the blessings God had prepared for them and, instead, were sentenced to spend 40 years spinning their wheels until an entire generation – with the exception of two heroes of faith, Joshua and Caleb – died in the wilderness.

The story of this national apostasy – this tragic, willful turning away from God by the very people God had miraculously brought out of Egypt – is the subject of Numbers 13 and 14. Along with the golden calf incident in Exodus 32, this is one of the darkest, most infamous, and most consequential events in the history of Israel

After setting out from Mount Sinai, the Israelites came to Kadesh (or Kadesh Barnea – see Deuteronomy 1:19) on the southern edge of Canaan. It took all of 11 days to go from Mount Sinai to Kadesh (Deuteronomy 1:1). But, because of unbelief, because of their unwillingness to believe and obey God, Israel would have to wait 40 years before crossing over into Canaan.

It all unfolded like this; The Lord tells Moses to send a team of spies to scout out the land of Canaan, to put some eyes on the ground, to see what the land and the people are like, and then to report back. So Moses sends out a team of 12 explorers, one from each tribe (except Levi), including one each from the half-tribes of Manasseh and Ephraim, the sons of Joseph. Among the 12 chosen are Caleb from the tribe of Judah and Hoshea (Joshua) from the half-tribe of Ephraim. Though there were ten others, Caleb and Joshua are the two worth remembering, because they are the two who trusted God and urged the people of Israel to go up and take possession of the land.

The spies go out, explore the land of Canaan, and then return. They are gone for 40 days, traveling a total of about 500 miles. When they return, they have a “show and tell” featuring the luscious fruit they have brought back with them, and they give a glowing report about the land. All 12 are unanimous in their praise of Canaan: It is a good and fertile land, they say, a land that “flow(s) with milk and honey” (13:17).

But, unfortunately, there is a “but” in their report. There is a huge “however” in their assessment of the land. Here is where the report of the spies diverges into a majority report (supported by ten of the 12 spies) and a minority report (presented by Caleb and Joshua). The “but” of the majority dampens the enthusiasm of the Israelite people and stirs up a frenzy of fear. “But the people who live there are powerful,” the majority says, “and the cities are fortified and very large” (13:28).

Though Caleb urges the people to “go up and take possession of the land,” as the Lord has told them, the others (minus Joshua) are convinced it would be a disastrous mistake. “We can’t attack those people,” they say. “They’re way stronger than we are.” So they proceed to spread “a bad report about the land they had explored.” *The Message* says they spread “scary rumors” among the people – exaggerations and distortions that fuel the fears of the people: The land, they said, “swallows people whole. Everybody we saw was huge. We even saw the Nephilim giants there. Alongside them we seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked like grasshoppers to them” (13:30-33).

The picture painted by the ten scouts is not a pretty one. It goes viral through the entire camp and leaves the people in a state of paralyzing fear. It creates mass hysteria that results in a mass rebellion, in Numbers 14. The people rebel against Moses and Aaron, but more fundamentally, they rebel against God: “The whole community was in an uproar, wailing all night long. All the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron, and the whole

assembly said to them: ‘If only we had died in Egypt! Or in this desert! Why has the Lord brought us here only to kill us? Why don’t we just go back to Egypt?’” (14:1-3)

Moses and Aaron respond to this outcry by falling on their faces before the assembly – a sign of grief, humility, and contrition before God. Caleb and Joshua make an impassioned appeal to the people not to rebel against the Lord, not to reject His leading or His lordship, and not to be afraid of the people who live in the land, for “if the Lord is pleased with us, He will lead us into that land ... and will give it to us ... (W)e will swallow them up. Their protection is gone, but the Lord is with us. Do not be afraid of them” (14:5-9).

The people, however, will not listen. Instead, they talk of stoning all four of them: Moses, Aaron, Joshua, and Caleb (14:10) – until the Lord makes an appearance and expresses His displeasure with the people and threatens again (as He had in Israel’s great sin with the golden calf) to destroy them all and to start over again with Moses (14:10-12).

As tempting as it may have been, Moses does not hesitate for even a second before interceding with the Lord to forgive the people. He pleads with God to reconsider and to show mercy to His people once more. But Moses’ overriding concern in his plea to the Lord is for the reputation and honor of God Himself. He says to the Lord: “If You destroy the whole nation, the Egyptians will hear about it, and they will tell others about it. They will say that You couldn’t do it, that You were not able to bring them into the land You promised to give them, so You slaughtered them all in the wilderness” (14:13-19).

The Lord does show mercy to His people, as Moses has asked. He does forgive them. Again. Just as He forgives us over and over again. But there is still a price to be paid by the people of Israel. Their unbelief has consequences. Their rebellion born of unbelief has consequences. Instead of promptly entering into the Promised Land, the whole nation will have to spend 40 years wandering in the wilderness, and they will not enter Canaan until the entire generation of those who were 20 years of age or older at the time of the first census in Numbers 1 has died off. Except for Caleb and Joshua. Because the people did not believe God, because they would not believe God or trust in His power to fulfill His promise to give them the land of Canaan as their own possession, they would never enter into it. They were sentenced to life – and ultimately death – in the wilderness (14:20-35). Such a tragedy.

But this is not quite the end of the story. The ten spies who had spread the bad report about the land and incited this national rebellion against God were struck down with a plague from God and died (14:36-38). When Moses told the people about the ten spies and the punishment God had pronounced on the nation as a whole, the people were overcome with remorse. “They mourned bitterly” (14:39).

Their mourning, however, was not a sign of true repentance. The apostle Paul makes a distinction in 2 Corinthians 7 between godly sorrow and worldly sorrow (7:9, 10). Godly sorrow brings real repentance – a change of heart that results in changed behavior. It is the kind of sorrow for sin that leads to salvation. Worldly sorrow, on the other hand, is being sorry for getting caught or being sorry for the consequences of your sins. You know the difference. Unfortunately, the sorrow of the Israelites on this occasion was the worldly kind.

Their “repentance,” if you can call it that, was not sincere. They thought they could simply undo the punishment God had pronounced by suddenly changing their minds and going up to Canaan as God had originally wanted them to do. But it was too late now. The opportune moment had come and gone. They had disqualified themselves from the blessing of entering the land by their unbelieving, rebellious hearts. Which should serve as a warning not to let anything like it happen to us.

Moses warned them that it would be an act of folly – another act of defiance – to go up into Canaan now, “because,” he said, “the Lord is not with you. You will be defeated by your enemies” (14:42). “Nevertheless,” we are told, “in their presumption they went up toward the high hill country” where they suffered a humiliating defeat (14:44, 45).

They had their chance. But they blew it. An entire generation would never see the Promised Land. They would die in the desert for their disobedience. Their bodies would be buried in the wilderness because of their unwillingness to trust in the power of God to fulfill His good promises to them. It is a terribly sad chapter in the history of God’s covenant people.

But it is all just ancient history, isn’t it? What, if anything, does it have to teach us? What does this sordid story have to do with us? Let me mention just two things.

### **1. CHOICES HAVE CONSEQUENCES**

First, it illustrates the elementary truth that actions have consequences. For good or ill. Choices have consequences. Decisions have consequences. In His providence God gives us freedom to make choices – all kinds of choices involving matters both great and small. Every day we exercise freedom as moral agents created in the image of God. This freedom is a gift and a trust from God. But God does not make us free from the consequences of our choices. The ten spies exercised their freedom when they brought a bad report back from their exploration of Canaan. The people of Israel exercised their freedom when they rejected the pleas of Caleb and Joshua to go up and take possession of the land. They were exercising their God-given freedom when they refused to trust God to give them the land He had promised to them. They acted freely. But there were consequences. And they could not avoid the consequences. Or undo them after the fact. For better or for worse, our choices have consequences.

It is true for each one of us. It is true for you and me. It is true for every person in our relationship with God. Like the people of Israel, each of us has a decision to make:

Will I trust God and obey him?

Will I follow His leading in my life?

Will I open my heart to receive the forgiveness that Jesus has purchased for me on the cross?

Will I embrace His grace and surrender to His loving and gracious rule in my life?

Will I repent and renounce every known sin in my life, including the sins that I enjoy and the sins that no one knows about except God?

Will I give them up now – not later but today?

Or will I tell God to come back another time?  
 Will I say “No, thank You” or “Not now” to God?  
 Will I be like the people of Israel and refuse to believe that God really is able to do what He says He will do?  
 Will I doubt God’s power and wisdom?  
 Will I let my circumstances overshadow my trust in God?  
 Will I let my fears overwhelm my faith?  
 Will I try to keep God at arm’s length – close enough to rescue me when I get into trouble, but not close enough to bother me when I’m doing my own thing?  
 Will I decide that my sins are nobody’s business, not even God’s, as long as I can convince myself that I’m not hurting anyone?  
 Will I decide that I’m better off trusting myself than trusting God?  
 Will I decide that I know better than God does what is in my best interests?

Will I choose the blessing of God that comes from the obedience of faith?  
 Or will I choose the displeasure and judgment of God that comes from resisting or saying “No” to Him?

Choices have consequences. Not just for Israel in the wilderness but for you and me in the here and now. And not just for us individually but for us together. For us as a church family. We are not a perfect church. You know that. We are a fellowship of sinners who, by the grace of God, are now redeemed sinners. Sinners saved by grace. We are in the process of being made holy. But our sanctification is not yet complete. God has not yet completed the good work He has begun in us. So we must be careful in our life together to keep our eyes on the prize, to keep in step with the Holy Spirit, and not to harbor unbelief or a rebellious spirit in our fellowship. We must submit unreservedly to the wisdom and authority of God’s inspired and infallible Word. We must, as it says in *The Message*, “let the Word of Christ have the run of the house” in our lives and in our life together (Colossians 3:16). As Jesus commands us, we must love God with everything we’ve got, love one another as He has loved us, and love our neighbors – including those right here in our own community – as we love ourselves (Mark 12:30-31; John 13:34). We must choose to carry out the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20). It is not enough to say we believe in the Great Commission to go and make disciples of all nations. We have to do it. Not to do it is to risk the judgment of God.

Choices have consequences for nations, too. Not just for other nations, but for *our* nation. Our nation has made decisions that have had (or will have) profound consequences. But, like the people of Israel, we have too often made choices – sometimes political, sometimes cultural, sometimes moral or spiritual – that have resulted in ungodly consequences. By misusing the freedom God has given us, we have too many times planted seeds of destruction that may yet cause our ultimate downfall as a nation.

I love this nation. But, like our third President, Thomas Jefferson, I grieve for my country when I remember that God is just. Though He has blessed us with abundance, we have turned away from Him. We are morally and spiritually compromised as a culture. More so, it seems, with every passing year. God will not delay His judgment forever. As long as there is

still opportunity, as long as the door remains open, we must as a people – all of us – turn back to God. Or truly turn to Him for the first time.

## **2. THE DANGER OF DELAY**

A second application from the story of Israel’s epic fail has to do with the danger of delay. In contrast to the ten spies who brought back the bad report, Caleb urged the people to obey God and to go up and take possession of the land without delay. “We can certainly do it,” he said (13:30). He and Joshua expressed their confidence that “if the Lord is pleased with us, He will lead us into (the) land, a land flowing with milk and honey, and will give it to us” (14:8).

Caleb and Joshua are the heroic figures of this story; Caleb, especially, since he has a more prominent role in the narrative. Someone has said that Caleb was not so much a man of great faith as a man of faith in a great God (NIV Life Application Bible). Caleb and Joshua as well knew that they were not the true heroes in the story of Israel’s deliverance from slavery in Egypt and their journey to the edge of the Promised Land. Nor were Moses and Aaron. The true hero of the story – the hero of the whole history of Israel and of God’s people all throughout history, right up to this moment – is God and God alone. Caleb chose to trust God. And it made all the difference in his life.

His appeal to the people not to delay, not to doubt or reject God, but to take God at His word and to get moving, is a reminder that to delay is sometimes to miss out on a divine opportunity.

## **A TIDE IN THE AFFAIRS OF MEN**

In Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* Brutus gives a speech in which he says to Cassius:

There is a tide in the affairs of men  
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;  
Omitted, all the voyage of their life  
Is bound in shallows and in miseries.  
On such a full sea we are now afloat,  
And we must take the current when it serves,  
Or lose our ventures.

Brutus makes no mention of the sovereignty of God, but in this “tide in the affairs of men” and nations God is sovereign. It is God who opens doors and closes doors. It is God who calls us to prompt and trusting obedience. Which is to say, do not put off until tomorrow, do not put off until another time, what God is telling you to do today. Do not delay when God says “Today.” Do not hesitate when God says “Go.”

This is a word with a particularly timely meaning for us. The Bible says; “Today if you hear God’s voice, do not harden your heart” as the children of Israel did in the wilderness (Psalm 95:7-8; cf. Hebrews 3:7-8, 15). At a personal level, if God is speaking to your heart, telling you that today is the time for action, do not delay.

I also think there is an application for us as a church, which has to do with our response to the Great Commission right here in the GO zone of Kingstowne and its surrounding areas. More than 20 years ago, the Lord brought us as a church family into the “promised land” of Kingstowne and enabled us to build this beautiful building as a base of operations for ministry in this community. But we have not invested ourselves fully in God’s mission to reach this community with the gospel. The time for delay is over. The time for action in the name of Jesus is now. And the call for action, in one way or another, involves every one of us.

As the people of Faith Church, may we be people of faith who hear the voice of God and follow Him without fear and without reservation, now and always. Lord, let it be so. Amen.