

## 10 Unbelief Numbers 13:1-3, 26-32, 14:1-45

Wow, it must have great mustn't it? God's people all together, out of slavery, lead by God, provided for by God with God's presence in their midst – the Ark of the Covenant, the tabernacle, Moses. Just brilliant!

Well, you would think so wouldn't you? But like any family where a great holiday is planned, you get the children all excited, pack the car, make sure that you have bags of sweets, magazines, their CD's ready to play and then just after you get to the end of the road you hear a voice from the back; "Are we nearly there yet?"

Well, it wasn't quite like that, but what should have been a magnificent journey to the Promised Land in a matter of months turned into a shameful exile of 40 years wandering in the desert.

Why? What happened? Well, really it revolves around the unbelief of God's people and the damage which that unbelief did to their relationship with God.

After a year at Mount Sinai God's people set out for the Promised Land, but just like children in the car they complain about how hard life is on the way to their great future. But it's not simply the general nagging against God, something much worse is to come; unbelief, a refusal to trust God's faithful promises.

As we continue our overview of the Bible, we come to the book of Numbers. Why is it called that? Well, it is our English name for this book and it comes from the old Greek translation (the Septuagint) of the Old Testament . The Septuagint gave it that name because chapters 1-4 are basically the returns of a census – so there are lots of numbers.

But the original Hebrew title for this book is Bemibdar which means “In the wilderness” and really it is one of those titles which would have been much better left alone because “in the wilderness” really gives a better idea of what is going on in this book.

As we pick up chapter 13 of the book of Numbers (or Bemibdar) we read that the LORD said to Moses, “Send some men to explore the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the Israelites. From each ancestral tribe send one of its leaders. So at the LORD's command Moses sent them out from the Desert of Paran. All of them were leaders of the Israelites.”

Now these three verses are crucial to what comes after because in these verses we discover that it is the LORD who A) Sends out a group of men to spy out the Promised Land on behalf of the people of Israel and B) God makes it plain that he is giving the land to his people.

Do you see how God is commanding here? He sends out with the reminder that these men are going into a land which is as good as theirs because God is giving it to them.

But not only do we discover God's authority we also see what sort of men make up this reconnaissance team – they are “leaders”; God commands that they must be and verse 3 confirms that they were. These are men of bravery and integrity, the kind of men leading their tribes under God's authority, the kind of men with a bit of get up and go, so let's see what they made of Canaan – the promised land.

Well, it's fantastic! To prove how amazing it is they cut off a branch bearing vines and it is so laden with fruit that it takes two men to carry it. They also gather pomegranates and figs. They spend 40 days on a fact finding mission and then take all their goodies home. And what is the report they give?

They tell Moses that the Promised Land is amazing, it “flows with milk and honey” – in other words it is rich and fertile and full of the best there is!

“Just one problem,” they add, “well, maybe two or three. The towns are strong and impossibly fortified – we’d never take them and the people themselves are strong and powerful and in fact they are massive - like giants – we look like grasshoppers next to them! It was a nice idea, but it’s no good dreaming about it, we are never going to capture that land, we might as well just forget about it.” The reaction of the “spies” is to declare “We cannot go in!”

Not what you might have expected. Now, in all fairness, they weren’t unanimous in their decision; Caleb and Joshua stand up against them, in 13:30 Caleb says, “We should do it – we can certainly do it” and in 14 verse 6 Joshua actually tears his clothes as a sign of anguish and repentance at his fellow countrymen’s unfaithfulness and he says why they can go in, “If the LORD is pleased with us, he will lead us into that land, a land flowing with milk and honey, and will give it to us. Only do not rebel against the LORD. And do not be afraid of the people of the land, because we will swallow them up. Their protection is gone, but the LORD is with us. Do not be afraid of them.”

Do you see the difference? Ten of the spies say “We can’t do it” but two; Joshua and Caleb remind everyone “God can do it – God has promised to do it”.

Have you ever noticed that distinction in your life? Maybe you’ve read something in the Bible, maybe you have heard something in a sermon and you’ve thought, “Well, it’s OK for him to say that, he’s a vicar! Or it’s OK for the Bible to say that – it was written 2000+ years ago in a totally different culture to mine – I could never do that.”

You know, that is one of the saddest things we do, we look at God's promises and we turn them into our responsibilities. The most obvious way we do that is with our salvation, you've heard me allude to this time and again but we are so prone to it. God says: I will rescue you, I have sent Jesus to die in your place, I have raised him to new and eternal life. Trust in him and know that you have been bought back from sin and death.

And we go, "What! You expect me to come along to church twice a week, read my Bible and pray for 3 hours every morning, be on the reading, praying, flower arranging, cleaning children's work and photocopying rota – and then I'll be saved. OK."

Or worse, "There's no way I could do that! I can't be a Christian, I'm just going to carry on with my life as it is."

Why do we do that? Why do we turn God's promises into our responsibilities? It is simply that we stop trusting in God. The spies returned and ten of them had stopped trusting in God and said "We cannot go in" and their doubt infected the whole people because the response is devastating – they say, "in that case, we will not go in!"

Look at Number 14:2-4. The ten faithless spies have sowed the seeds of doubt and the people allow those seeds to take root in their hearts, "All the Israelites grumbled against Moses and Aaron, and the whole assembly said to them, If only we had died in Egypt! Or in this desert! Why is the LORD bringing us to this land only to let us fall by the sword? Our wives and children will be taken as plunder. Wouldn't it be better for us to go back to Egypt? And they said to each other, We should choose a leader and go back to Egypt."

Do you see what happens? Stage 1; "All the Israelites grumbled against Moses and Aaron, and the whole assembly said to

them, "If only we had died in Egypt! Or in this desert!" Stage one is that they say to the human leaders, "It's all your fault! It would have been better off dieing in the wilderness than going into the Promised Land and being slaughtered".

But then here comes stage two, not only do they grumble against humans, they grumble against God. "Why is the LORD bringing us to this land only to let us fall by the sword? Our wives and children will be taken as plunder." Fundamentally they have forgotten God's promises or chosen to ignore them. They have stopped trusting God, they have stopped truly believing him when he speaks.

But do you remember what God promised? "Send some men to explore the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the Israelites." It's the promise Joshua reminds them of, "If the LORD is pleased with us, he will lead us into that land, a land flowing with milk and honey, and [he] will give it to us." But the people just don't want to hear it.

So, do you see the dangerous spiral of unbelief? That it actually ends up with us not trusting God? At St. Andrew's we often sing a hymn with the words,

"From the breaking of the dawn, To the setting of the sun  
I will stand on every promise of Your word  
Words of power strong to save, That will never pass away  
I will stand on every promise of Your word  
For Your covenant is sure, And on this I am secure  
I can stand on every promise of Your word" But do we? Do we stand on every promise of God's word? Do we treat God's promises as God's promises: trustworthy, true, dependable, honest, reliable? Or are they nice to listen to but (in our opinion) of no real everyday, practical worth?

Well, the Israelites didn't stand on every promise of God's word. The spies said "We cannot go in", the people said,

“We will not go in” and God’s response? He said to them, “You will never go in!”

God has promised his people a land, a good land, a land for them to live in as his people – the Promised Land. God has led them out of slavery, through the desert, he has provided for them again and again and taken them to it’s borders and yet God’s people refuse to trust the word of their God and instead they actually openly begin talking about stoning Moses, Aaron, Joshua and Caleb and appointing new leaders to lead them back to Egypt and once more from freedom into slavery.

Again and again you will come across people outside (and sadly inside) the church who will tell you that it doesn’t really matter what you do in your life, that God will welcome you into heaven at the end. But last week we saw that that isn’t what Jesus says and it isn’t what God the Father says either. Here it is quite clear that these people don’t want trust God’s promise, they don’t want to live in his Promised Land, they want to carry on living as they have been and God’s response to them is fair; they don’t want to go into the promised Land and so God says that not one of them will enter the Promised Land, only Caleb and Joshua because they trusted in God.

If you live a life denying God and refusing to enter his kingdom now what makes you think you would want to enter God’s eternal heavenly Kingdom? What makes you think God will force you into something you aren’t prepared to take on trust now?

No, this whole passage is all about trusting God’s promises and the danger of living as if you know better than he does.

There’s an ironic twist at the end of Numbers chapter 14 where God’s judgement has been pronounced;

the ten spies have been struck down by plague and Moses has told the people that they are condemned by God to wander in the wilderness for forty years until that generation are all dead – only their children and Caleb and Joshua will cross the Jordan into the Promised Land.

Suddenly they realise what they have done, but it with a heavy heart and maybe simply a sense of “I suppose we ought to trust God” that they decide to try to head into the Promised Land after all. But in reality they are still not listening to God.

Moses begs them, “Why are you disobeying the LORD's command? This will not succeed! Do not go up, because the LORD is not with you. You will be defeated by your enemies, for the Amalekites and Canaanites will face you there. Because you have turned away from the LORD, he will not be with you and you will fall by the sword.” (Num 14:41-43)

They just don't learn do they? Although they look like they are doing what God wants, the situation has now changed and in effect they are still refusing to believe God's promises. The outcome is disastrous; just as Moses predicted the Israelites are attacked and beaten and in line with God's judgement it is another 40 years before he leads them into the Promised Land.

So really, when we look at these verses we see that it's nothing new for God's people to not trust God's promises, but that doesn't make it a good thing. This episode in the Old Testament book of Numbers – in the wilderness - shows us the terrible tragedies which occur when we will not trust God.

We know that we have good reason not to trust salesmen, or perhaps even our friends or families, and the polls this week have revealed how we punish the politicians who break our trust, but when it comes God we can trust him; his promises are always trustworthy and true.

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15, “If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.” He goes on to say that if we believe in Jesus only here and now then we are to be pitied more than everyone; what a pointless, sad life we live.

But God’s promises are true, Jesus has been raised from the dead, Peter and hundreds of other witnesses were prepared to put their lives on the line to confirm that they had seen the risen Christ who had defeated death and sin.

Our challenge is will we live by God’s promises? God speaks to us through his word just as he spoke to Moses. He has made us firm promises, but will we trust him? You see, we sometimes wonder what sin is; is it murder, is it adultery, is it lying, is it homosexuality, is it lust, is it theft, is it 101 other things?

In a nutshell, sin is unbelief, sin is saying “God, I don’t believe you, I don’t trust you, I’m going to do it my way.” And that will always end (as it did in the wilderness) with God justly and righteously judging us and condemning us.

No, let’s not be like the unbelieving majority in Numbers 13 and 14, let’s be like Caleb and Joshua, people who see that life isn’t a bed of roses, but who recognise that we have a God who is greater and stronger and more trustworthy than anything and anyone out there and let’s trust in his hope-giving promises.

“Hope that lifts me from despair, Love that casts out every fear  
As I stand on every promise of Your word  
Not forsaken not alone, For the Comforter has come  
And I stand on every promise of Your word  
Grace sufficient grace for me, Grace for all who will believe  
We will stand on every promise of Your word.” Amen.