

The Catastrophe of Unbelief

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Numbers 13 – 14

Have you ever watched a movie or TV show and as you did, someone in the movie was in imminent danger and you felt the urge to warn them about the calamity that was about to engulf them? How many of us have watched a movie on the *Titanic* and as the captain self-confidently but recklessly pushed ahead at full steam, we find ourselves wishing he would slow down; “*There are icebergs ahead!*” Or we wonder how the military commanders in Hawai’i in 1941 could have missed all the indicators of an impending attack.

There are many pages of history we wish could be rewritten; examples of complacency, poor judgement, and bad choices. Included among those pages are ones detailing the history of God’s people. A pivotal one is the one we will look at today.

Israel’s Journey to Kadesh-Barnea

In the past several messages we have followed the journey of Israel from captivity in Egypt across the wilderness, through the Red Sea, to Mt. Sinai. There at the Mountain of God they gathered in a solemn assembly before God and received His Law. During those momentous days as He descended on the mountain, He gave instructions on how to relate to Him and conduct themselves to experience His blessing and live enriched lives. He provided a template to those gathered at Mt. Sinai, and to us as well, how to experience an abundant and God-honoring life.

The Hebrews saw the unmistakable hand of God as He besieged the Egyptians with 10 plagues. The last of those judgements was the death of the firstborn. As God struck down the firstborn throughout Egypt, He *passed-over* the homes of those who by faith put the blood of their Passover lamb on the door posts and lintels of their homes. Days later the supernatural intervention and power of God was on display as He did the unimaginable – He parted the Red Sea to provide a path for His people and then closed it on the pursuing Egyptians. Nevertheless, despite the unmistakable evidence of God’s presence and provision for His people, Israel harbored an attitude of unbelief.

Only 3 days after the Red Sea crossing the people grumbled about the bitter water at Marah (Exo 15.22-25). A few days later they not only grumbled about food but wished they would have died back in Egypt where they had plenty to eat, rather than die of hunger in the wilderness (16.1-3). As they made their way to Mt. Sinai, rather than believe God would provide them with water just like He was providing them with manna each day, they again quarreled with Moses and wished they had remained in Egypt rather than die of thirst in the desert (17.1-7). One would have thought that watching water gush forth from a massive lifeless rock would surely dispel any remaining unbelief about God and His providential care for them, but it was only days later when they turned from God in one of the best-known examples of

rebellion. While Moses spent 40 days up Mt. Sinai where he met with God and received the 10 Commandments, the people inexplicably dismissed Moses as their God-appointed leader and asked Aaron to fashion gods to replace the God who redeemed them from Egypt. And perhaps even more inexplicable, Aaron went ahead and fashioned the golden calf for them to worship and sacrifice to. Moses pleaded with God to not destroy Israel, but to remember His reputation and His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and the Lord relented (Exo 32). In the following months they built the Tabernacle which would be a visual reminder of the presence of God among them (40.17). What a memorable day it must have been when they dedicated the Tabernacle and the glory of the Lord filled the Tabernacle to commemorate their 1st anniversary of redemption from Egypt (40.34). Reinforcing the anniversary of God's intervention on their behalf was the celebration of the Passover (Num 9.1).

About 5 weeks later the Lord directed His people to leave Mt. Sinai and begin the final leg of their journey to the Promised Land (Num 10.11-12). It was only 3 days later when the people began to complain about their misfortunes (10.33; 11.1). Despite the Lord's judgement upon them, many ignored the opportunity to address their unbelief. Instead a group among them complained they had no meat to eat, unlike the varied and abundant diet they had back in Egypt (11.4-6). All they now had was manna (11.7-9). The people were so distraught over their misfortune the sound of weeping was heard throughout the camp. "Moses heard the people weeping throughout their clans, everyone at the door of his tent. And the anger of the LORD blazed hotly, and Moses was displeased." (Numbers 11:10 ESV)



A destructive and eventually catastrophic pattern had developed among the Hebrew people. Murmuring and complaining became their default response every time they encountered an obstacle or faced a disappointment. They exemplified that when murmuring and complaining becomes an acceptable response, it takes root, it spreads like a wildfire and can consume the most unlikely people. Who would have thought that Miriam and Aaron, Moses' sister and brother, would add their voices to the chorus of grumblers and complainers? But they did! They complained about Moses' wife and challenged Moses as God's appointed leader (12.1-2). They argued, as people often do when they resist their leader's direction, that God didn't only speak through Moses, but through them as well. Read through the account as God pointed out to them that not only was Moses appointed by Him, but He spoke with him face to face. Because of Miriam's rebellion, God made her leprous and expelled her from the camp for a week (12.3-15). When Miriam was permitted to return to the camp, the people continued their journey from Sinai to Kadesh-Barnea.

As you reflect on Israel's behavior you may find yourself wondering how they could fail to grasp the sufficiency of God in caring for them. They were surrounded with

visible evidence of His presence and His provision. Every day as they went out to gather the manna He had placed there throughout the night, it should have evoked a consciousness of God's awareness of their needs and His daily provision. How could anyone doubt God when the memory of their Red Sea crossing and the destruction of pharaoh and his army was surely indelibly imprinted in their minds? Unfortunately they missed the magnitude of what happened and continued to happen. They were so self-focused they missed the hand of God. The complaining was so pervasive that it wore Moses down and he began to doubt God's continued provision; God reminded him,

"And the LORD said to Moses, 'Is the LORD's hand shortened? Now you shall see whether my word will come true for you or not.'" (Numbers 11:23 ESV). None of their needs, nor the challenges they would face, exceeded God's ability to provide for them!

The Expedition

The Lord led His people from Mt. Sinai and they arrived at the next stop, *Kadesh*, or *Kadesh-Barnea* (13.26). It was to be their base camp from which they would enter the Promised Land that had been promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob centuries earlier. The Lord directed Moses to assemble a group of 12 men to check out the land.

Numbers 13:1–3 (ESV) The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 2 "Send men to spy out the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the people of Israel. From each tribe of their fathers you shall send a man, every one a chief among them." 3 So Moses sent them from the wilderness of Paran, according to the command of the LORD, all of them men who were heads of the people of Israel.

Over the next 40 days these 12 men became the first Hebrews to walk in Canaan since Jacob and his family left more than 400 years earlier. They would see where God had met Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Talk about returning to see the land of your ancestors! And in their case, God was going to restore this land to them. From Kadesh they headed north, perhaps passing through Beersheba, Hebron, Bethel, Shechem, Beth-shan, Capernaum, and to the northern most location of Rehob,



The Journey of the 12 Spies
The New Moody Atlas of the Bible Map 35

near Lebo-hamath, as shown on the map. It had to have been exciting after having spent a year in the barrenness of Mt. Sinai where there was little vegetation – just a lot of sand, rock and *wilderness*. In contrast to that, they were surrounded with abundant signs of life. They had to be overwhelmed with the beauty and had they had cameras they would have been snapping pictures and taking videos of this land of milk and honey. At Eshcol they cut off a branch of grapes with a cluster of grapes so heavy they carried it on a pole between two of them (13.23). They brought back tangible proof to show the waiting people.

The Report

Think about the anticipation of Israel as they waited for the return of the expedition party. At the end of 40 days they returned (13.25). They must have been impressed when they saw the grapes. It shouldn't have been a surprise to the people that in light of the prosperity of the land, there were large and well fortified cities filled with people who appeared strong.

Numbers 13:27–29 (ESV) 27 And they told him, “We came to the land to which you sent us. It flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. 28 However, the people who dwell in the land are strong, and the cities are fortified and very large. And besides, we saw the descendants of Anak there. 29 The Amalekites dwell in the land of the Negeb. The Hittites, the Jebusites, and the Amorites dwell in the hill country. And the Canaanites dwell by the sea, and along the Jordan.”

What happened next would irreversibly shape the future of Israel. They stood on the threshold of the Promised Land. They had the enviable position of being the people God had freed from the grasp of Egypt. Forty years later people were still talking about the God of the Hebrews who had parted the Red Sea for them. Who could stand against such a God? Despite his resolve and the strength of his military, pharaoh found out he was no match for the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The Amalekites, Hittites, Jebusites, Amorites, and Canaanites who dwelt in the Promised Land had no reason to believe they would fare any better.

The Response

The response of the people was shaped by their persistent failure to include God and His intervention in addressing their obstacles. Despite continued reminders of God's miraculous provision, they overlooked the possibility of His future intervention. Their perspective stood in sharp contrast to that of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who looked to the future with unwavering faith in God's fulfillment of His promise. The people assembled at Kadesh-Barnea, despite all the unmistakable evidence to the contrary, were controlled by an entrenched mindset of unbelief. Rather than pause and review what had happened during the past two years and take that into account, unbelief controlled their assessment. They ignored the fact they had been miraculously set free from slavery and stood on the doorstep of the Promised Land. Surely if God was able to free them from the grasp of Egypt He was capable of dealing with the occupants of the Promised Land. Instead of considering that, they dismissed God and their mindset of unbelief dominated them. They would become a vivid example of the consequences of being governed by a deceptive mindset mirroring the world of

darkness rather than choosing to reshape and renew their minds with the truth. While they had been physically freed from the captivity of Egypt, their minds remained captive to unbelief. They overlooked all that God had done! They wanted just one more sign before they would believe and entrust their future to Him. The focus of the report of 10 of the spies very quickly shifted from the abundance of the land to the enormity of its defenses and the strength of the people who occupied it.

Caleb sensed the momentum shifting from *opportunity* to *opposition* and tried to refocus the people. “But Caleb quieted the people before Moses and said, ‘Let us go up at once and occupy it, for we are well able to overcome it.’” (Numbers 13:30 ESV). Caleb knew the very same God who delivered them from Egypt was more than able. The other 10 countered. “Then 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 are.’” (Numbers 13:31 ESV). Unbelief and an impoverished view of God is a powerful and controlling enemy. If left unchallenged and unchecked its dominance flourishes and becomes more and more entrenched. Unbelief distorts the accuracy of assessing obstacles and restricts envisioning solutions. Consider the descent to defeat as the 10 continued with their mindset of unbelief.

Numbers 13:32–33 (ESV) 32 So they brought to the people of Israel a bad report of the land that they had spied out, saying, “The land, through which we have gone to spy it out, is a land that devours its inhabitants, and all the people that we saw in it are of great height. 33 And there we saw the Nephilim (the sons of Anak, who come from the Nephilim), and we seemed to ourselves like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them.”

They only envisioned the impossibility of victory and certain defeat. They concluded it *devours all its inhabitants*. Their last statement is the most revealing, “*we seemed to ourselves like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them.*” Rather than viewing themselves as victors, they had become persuaded they were only *grasshoppers*. And despite not really knowing how the current occupants viewed them, they had persuaded themselves they too saw them as *grasshoppers*. It is much more likely their hearts were melting with fear as was still the case with the inhabitants of Jericho 40 years later.

Joshua 2:10–11 (ESV) 10 For we have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon and Og, whom you devoted to destruction. 11 And as soon as we heard it, our hearts melted, and there was no spirit left in any man because of you, for the LORD your God, he is God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath.

The 10 spies forgot the most important truth and the one that makes all the difference – **God!** Even if they saw themselves as grasshoppers and even if the current occupants also saw them as grasshoppers, that didn’t control the outcome. Victory wasn’t dependent on them and their abilities. Victory was dependent on God and His ability! They only needed to trust God: believe what He had said He would

do! Not surprisingly, the negative report swept through the camp and was embraced by the people. Unbelief took over and snuffed out any thought of victory.

Numbers 14:1–4 (ESV) 14 Then all the congregation raised a loud cry, and the people wept that night. 2 And all the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The whole congregation said to them, “Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! 3 Why is the LORD bringing us into this land, to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become a prey. Would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?” 4 And they said to one another, “Let us choose a leader and go back to Egypt.”

Instead of picturing the victory God offered, the people grieved over their plight. They were so consumed by their unbelief they wished to die in the wilderness rather than the certain fate of being killed in a battle for the land. They turned their backs on God and on Moses, His anointed one. Their disoriented minds sought for someone to take them back to slavery in Egypt.

While Moses and Aaron grieved over the people’s unbelief, Joshua and Caleb pled for them to reconsider their rebellion. Victory was not dependent on them, but God. The Lord would bring them into the land and give it to them. “Only do not rebel against the LORD. And do not fear the people of the land, for they are bread for us. Their protection is removed from them, and the LORD is with us; do not fear them.” (Numbers 14:9 ESV). The passionate appeal of Joshua and Caleb fell on deaf ears. The hearts of the people were hard; they were unreceptive to God. Held in the grip of unbelief they determined to stone Caleb and Joshua (14.10).

The Result

God had been very patient with the ongoing unbelief of Israel and continued to graciously provide for them despite their grumbling and complaining. However, God’s patience had been exhausted and this time there would be overwhelming and irreversible catastrophic results.

Numbers 14:11–12 (ESV) 11 And the LORD said to Moses, “How long will this people despise me? And how long will they not believe in me, in spite of all the signs that I have done among them? 12 I will strike them with the pestilence and disinherit them, and I will make of you a nation greater and mightier than they.”

Once again Moses interceded for the people and God relented from completely destroying them. However, God granted the wish of the people to die in the wilderness rather than face the inhabitants of the Promised Land. This was the closest the men 20 years old or older, and presumably their wives, would ever get to the Promised Land – they would die in the wilderness (14.22-23; 28-30). Every day, until the 40 years were over, they would be reminded of their rebellion against God as they buried their dead. Over the coming decades they would bury an average of about 45 men every day.

What Can We Learn From This?

For most of us we stand back in disbelief as we read this account. We want to rewind the clock and have them do a rerun. How could they have been so blinded and miss the opportunity generations of Jews had longed for. Unbelief is irrational and illogical. God was holding the door open to the Promised Land and they pushed it shut. Unfortunately they failed to learn from past rebellion. Every time in the past when they complained about an obstacle and believed God had abandoned them, they failed to learn from God's rebuke and His gracious provision and display of His magnificent glory. Somehow they missed seeing the hand of God.

Long before Paul warned the believers in Corinth about the agenda of satan to deceive people and blind their eyes, Israel fell victim to that agenda of deception.

2 Corinthians 4:3–4 (ESV) 3 And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. 4 In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

The Promised Land is a symbol of finding rest in God. It is first a picture of the rest a person experiences when they place their trust in Jesus Christ for salvation. Second, it is a picture of the eternal rest believers will experience when they go to heaven.

The Invitation to Find Rest in Jesus Christ

Jesus invites everyone to find rest in Him, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” (Matthew 11:28 ESV). He is of course inviting people who are lost in their sin to accept His invitation to turn to Him for forgiveness from their sins and receive the gift of eternal life. All lost sinners need to do is believe the Gospel, in other words accept God's assessment of their need and God's provision of the solution for their need.

During the past 45 years God has given me opportunity to share the Gospel with many people. Many of them were unaware that Jesus, the divine Son of God, had come to earth to pay the price for their sins so they wouldn't need to. Most thought that in order to be received by God they needed to earn their way, or at least try hard to win God's favor and if they were sincere enough and didn't do something they thought was outrageously evil, God would accept them. But the truth is, the only thing people can do to be saved from their sins is to believe God. In His Word He makes it clear people need to place their faith and trust in Jesus Christ and His sacrifice on the cross for their sins.

John 3:16 (ESV) For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

Romans 6:23 (ESV) For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The amazing thing about salvation is it is free! “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. (Ephesians 2:8–9 ESV).

As irrational as the choice of the people at Kadesh-Barnea, **it is even more irrational and illogical to not believe the Gospel of salvation through Jesus Christ**. He not only promises rest and care during one’s earthly life, but a place in heaven thereafter. The alternative is a life without hope and without God, followed by an eternity in a godless hell governed by satan and his demonic hoard. Their destiny is pictured by the children of Israel who rejected God’s promise and died in the wilderness.

A New Testament passage of Scripture that refers to the rebellion of the people at Kadesh-Barnea is Hebrews 3 – 4. Using the example of the unbelief of Israel, God warns people to beware, “Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the wilderness,” (Hebrews 3:7–8 ESV). Unbelief is so concerning and consequential that the Lord inspired the author of Hebrews to repeat the warning in the next chapter, “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.” (Hebrews 4:7b ESV).

The initial recipients of the letter to the Hebrews were people who had generally professed faith in Jesus Christ, but some were rethinking that choice. Some were considering reverting back to former beliefs and setting aside Jesus Christ as the only means of salvation. They stood on the threshold of belief – whether to press forward with Jesus Christ as their Savior and walk with Him or abandon Him and any kind of meaningful walk with Him. It is those in particular that the appeal in Hebrews is directed to. The presumption is that the Holy Spirit still speaks to people through the Word of God (Heb 3.7). When people hear the claims of Jesus Christ in the Gospel of salvation, they are urged to listen attentively and not harden their hearts as did the people at Kadesh-Barnea, rather displace unbelief with the evidence that validates the claims of the Gospel.

The Invitation to a More Mature Walk With Jesus Christ

There is also application to those of us who are followers of Jesus Christ. Despite having a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, Christians sometimes forget about God’s promises and His provisions for His children. It is easy to be overwhelmed by adversity, obstacles, and hardships we encounter and become so absorbed in addressing them to unconsciously push God to the margin of our lives. Last Sunday evening in our Prayer Meeting Len Rasmussen drew attention to 2 verses in Colossians that sum it up well.

Colossians 3:1–2 (ESV) 3 If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. 2 Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.

Let us not miss the obvious. Every bit of evidence the children of Israel had before they arrived at Kadesh-Barnea, is also evidence to us of the outstretched hand of

God. Additionally, we have centuries filled with more evidence of the presence and provisions of God. We live on this side of the cross and the certainty of the resurrection of Jesus Christ and His victory over sin.

One of the places where we all find application these days are the restrictions due to COVID-19. Some are dealing with health issues that have nothing to do with COVID. As we age we are faced with generally deteriorating health which will likely continue until the Lord takes us home where we will be in line for a resurrection body which will be without spot or defect. Some people cope with jobs that fall far short of their expectations. And the list goes on. Living in the desert eating manna every day would get old for all of us pretty fast. But the fact is, a victorious walk is available in every situation.

It begins with an elevated view of God. Too many settle for an impoverished perspective and view life from an earthbound vantage point rather than a heavenly one. The choices of the children of Israel challenge all of us to look heavenward and hold tightly to the outstretched hand of God. They are also a reminder to examine ourselves and root out grumbling and complaining. We are children of the Triune God of this universe who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing. He has provided the means for our victory. Many of our circumstances may not change, but how we relate to them certainly can.

If you are struggling or feeling down today and unbelief is stealing away victory, take out a sheet of paper or two and begin listing reasons to be thankful. List the benefits and blessings you are a recipient of. Where have you seen the hand of God in your life? Where do you see His imprint? Add the promises and provisions God has made for you. If you have difficulty coming up with them, open your Bible and start reading until you find a promise or provision that pertains to you. By now you should be well beyond the first page of paper. Then, ask yourself if there are any places you can support or be an encourager of others. Who could you call or contact today to encourage?

Conclusion

Don't allow the lessons we can learn from this **Key Event In Our History** slip through your fingers. Let all of us ensure we don't follow the example of Israel in their **Catastrophe of Unbelief**. We must be careful to guard our faith; to protect it against anything that would undermine it. We need to be observant of those things which validate our faith and reveal the hand of God. Make a record of them and keep the list at hand so you can refer to it on a blue day. Look for truths to elevate your view of God.

May the following sung by *Sovereign Grace Music*, bless your heart today: ***Turn Your Eyes • The Glorious Christ***

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F2tKVqZZiI4&ab_channel=SovereignGraceMusic