

Daily Bread with Brother Hwa-Chi (Not reviewed by the speaker, for personal use only)
Numbers 13:1–20

Peace be with you, brothers and sisters. This is Hwa-Chi. Thank the Lord, it is time for our Bible reading again. This week we are reading Numbers chapters 12 and 13. Today, we will continue with Numbers 13:1–20.

After going through extensive preparation, the Israelites finally set out into the Wilderness of Paran. Yet unexpectedly, they failed almost immediately when they were tested. At their first stop, Kibroth Hattaavah, they gave themselves over to the desires of the flesh. They despised God's grace and greedily gathered quail to satisfy their cravings. This provoked the anger of the Lord, and God struck many of those who had yielded to their cravings with a severe plague. At their second stop, Hazeroth, the leaders failed to submit to the spiritual authority God had established, and this brought God's discipline upon them. Miriam, Moses' sister and a prophetess, was struck with leprosy and shut outside the camp for seven days. As a result, the entire nation of Israel was delayed for seven days and could not move forward.

Chapters 13 and 14 describe an even greater failure: unbelief. Because of this failure, the entire first generation of Israelites was prevented from entering the Promised Land, with the exception of Caleb and Joshua. These three events are connected and form a progression. First, the Israelites indulged the desires of the flesh. Then they rebelled against spiritual authority. Finally, they developed an evil heart of unbelief. There is a recognizable progression in their spiritual decline.

The New Testament church should take Israel's experience as a warning. If we indulge the desires of the flesh and refuse to submit to spiritual authority, the natural result can be the bitter fruit of unbelief. Therefore, the author of Hebrews warns us in Hebrews 3:12–14, "Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; but exhort one another daily, while it is called 'Today,' lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our

confidence steadfast to the end.” May we all receive this warning, encourage one another, and hold firmly to the faith we had from the beginning, so that we may remain partakers of Christ.

Verses 1–2: “And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ‘Send men to spy out the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the children of Israel; from each tribe of their fathers you shall send a man, every one a leader among them.’”

Here we are told that the Lord instructed Moses to send men to spy out the land of Canaan, the land God was giving to the Israelites. In fact, if the Israelites had possessed complete faith in God, there would have been no need to spy out or scout the land. Since God had already promised it to them, they could simply have gone forward and taken possession of it. Why, then, did God tell Moses to send spies into Canaan?

To understand this, we need to look at Deuteronomy chapter 1. By that time, Moses was in the wilderness east of the Jordan River, speaking to the second generation of Israelites. As he reviewed their journey and the events that had taken place, Moses reminded them of what happened when they arrived at Kadesh Barnea—the location of the events recorded in Numbers 13. At that point, they were already near the entrance to the Promised Land.

Moses said to the Israelites in Deuteronomy 1:21–23, “Look, the LORD your God has set the land before you; go up and possess it, as the LORD God of your fathers has spoken to you; do not fear or be discouraged. And every one of you came near to me and said, ‘Let us send men before us, and let them search out the land for us, and bring back word to us of the way by which we should go up, and of the cities into which we shall come.’ The plan pleased me well; so I took twelve of your men, one man from each tribe.”

Moses’ original instruction was for them to go directly into the land and take possession of it. He encouraged them not to be afraid or discouraged. But the Israelites lacked faith. For the sake of security, they wanted to send men ahead to

scout the land before deciding how they should enter it. Since the people did not have enough faith simply to go forward and possess the land, Moses did not force them. Faith cannot be forced. Either it is present or it is not; genuine faith cannot be manufactured or pretended.

Perhaps Moses brought the people's request before God and sought His direction. To go directly into the land and possess it was God's best will for them, but doing so required faith. Sending spies first to investigate the land and then deciding how to proceed was something God permitted in response to the people's request. Since they did not yet have sufficient faith to possess the land directly, God allowed them to send the spies. Yet even within what God permitted, the people still needed to exercise faith. Otherwise, they could easily fall into unbelief.

When Moses sought the Lord, God instructed him to select one leader from each tribe and form a reconnaissance team to spy out Canaan. Those chosen as leaders would normally have been men of greater maturity, experience, and standing among the people. By selecting one representative from each tribe, all twelve tribes were represented. In this way, the decision and report of these twelve men would affect the whole nation. Their mission would become a test revealing the faith—or lack of faith—of Israel as a whole.

Verse 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 children of Israel.”

By this time, the Israelites had arrived in the Wilderness of Paran, more specifically in the region of Kadesh. In obedience to God's command, Moses selected one leader from each tribe. The “heads” mentioned here were leaders of clans within the tribes. Each tribe consisted of several large clans, and each clan was made up of many households. The tribal leadership was drawn from among these clan leaders.

Therefore, the leaders mentioned here were not the same twelve tribal leaders listed in Numbers 1:5–16. Those men were the chief leaders of their tribes and

commanders of Israel's military forces. The men chosen here were probably somewhat younger, since they needed the physical strength and endurance required for the demanding task of scouting the land. Verses 4–15 carefully list the leader selected from each tribe. Let us first read the passage.

Verses 4–15: “Now these were their names: from the tribe of Reuben, Shammua the son of Zaccur; from the tribe of Simeon, Shaphat the son of Hori; from the tribe of Judah, Caleb the son of Jephunneh; from the tribe of Issachar, Igal the son of Joseph; from the tribe of Ephraim, Hoshea the son of Nun; from the tribe of Benjamin, Palti the son of Raphu; from the tribe of Zebulun, Gaddiel the son of Sodi; from the tribe of Joseph, that is, from the tribe of Manasseh, Gaddi the son of Susi; from the tribe of Dan, Ammiel the son of Gemalli; from the tribe of Asher, Sethur the son of Michael; from the tribe of Naphtali, Nahbi the son of Vophsi; from the tribe of Gad, Geuel the son of Machi.”

Twelve names are listed here. First, we notice that the tribe of Levi is not included because the Levites had been set apart for service at the tabernacle and did not participate in Israel's military campaigns. Second, these twelve men were not the principal leaders of their tribes, which may explain why most of their names are unfamiliar to us. Nevertheless, because they were leaders, they must have possessed a certain degree of maturity and standing among the people and were qualified to represent their respective tribes.

Although most of these names are unfamiliar to us, two of these men stand out because of their faith: Caleb from the tribe of Judah and Hoshea from the tribe of Ephraim. Later, the entire first generation of Israelites would die in the wilderness, but these two men, because of their faith, would enter the Promised Land. The other ten leaders lacked faith, brought back an evil report, and were eventually struck down by God.

Verse 16: “These are the names of the men whom Moses sent to spy out the land. And Moses called Hoshea the son of Nun, Joshua.”

God specifically records the names of these twelve leaders whom Moses sent to spy out the land of Canaan. When they returned and gave their report, their words had an enormous influence upon the congregation of Israel and directly affected the destiny of an entire generation.

The verse adds one important detail: Moses changed the name of Hoshea, the son of Nun from the tribe of Ephraim, to Joshua. “Hoshea” means “salvation,” while “Joshua” carries the meaning “the LORD is salvation.” Joshua was Moses’ assistant, and he would later succeed Moses as the leader who brought Israel into the Promised Land. His life truly reflected the meaning of his name: the LORD is salvation. Verses 17–20 then record the instructions Moses gave to the twelve spies.

Verses 17–18: “Then Moses sent them to spy out the land of Canaan, and said to them, ‘Go up this way into the South, and go up to the mountains, and see what the land is like: whether the people who dwell in it are strong or weak, few or many.’”

Moses sent them to spy out Canaan, instructing them to enter through the southern region and then proceed into the hill country. The southern part of Canaan, known as the Negev, was a dry and relatively barren region. From there, they were to travel northward through the hill country, where there were many towns and fortified settlements. They were to observe the condition of the land and determine whether its inhabitants were strong or weak, few or many. In other words, they were to gain an understanding of the people, their way of life, and the general conditions of the land.

Verse 19: “Whether the land they dwell in is good or bad; whether the cities they inhabit are like camps or strongholds.”

In addition to observing the inhabitants, the spies were to examine the places where they lived. Did the people live in temporary camps or in permanent settlements? What were their cities like? Did they have high walls and strong fortifications? Were they heavily defended? Since Israel would eventually need to take possession of these cities, it was important to understand their military defenses.

Verse 20: “Whether the land is rich or poor; and whether there are forests there or not. Be of good courage. And bring some of the fruit of the land.” Now the time was the season of the first ripe grapes.

Moses also instructed them to examine the soil. Was it fertile or poor? Was the land barren, or was it filled with crops? Were there trees and forests? What were its geographical and agricultural conditions? It was the season when the first grapes were ripening, so Moses specifically encouraged them to be courageous and bring back some of the fruit of the land. The fruit would allow the Israelites to see with their own eyes that the land God had promised them was indeed a good and fruitful land.

Moses’ purpose in sending the spies was not merely to gather intelligence. He also hoped they would return with a report describing the richness and abundance of the land, stirring within the people a desire to go forward and possess the land God had promised them. Dear brothers and sisters, perhaps you may wonder: How could God command the Israelites to take the land belonging to the Canaanites? Would that not simply be an act of invasion? To understand this, we need to remember that four hundred years earlier, God had already promised Abraham, the ancestor of Israel, that He would give the land of Canaan to his descendants.

This is recorded in Genesis 15:13–16, “Then He said to Abram: ‘Know certainly that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, and will serve them,

and they will afflict them four hundred years. And also the nation whom they serve I will judge; afterward they shall come out with great possessions. Now as for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried at a good old age. But in the fourth generation they shall return here, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.”

At that time, Abraham did not yet have a son, so there was no possibility for his descendants to possess the land immediately. God foretold that Abraham’s descendants would live as strangers in another land—Egypt—and that after four hundred years they would come out with great possessions. This prophecy was fulfilled when Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt. They were then to return to Canaan and receive the inheritance God had promised them.

Why, then, did God make them wait four hundred years? Because, as the passage says, “the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.” Therefore, Israel’s conquest of Canaan should also be understood in the context of divine judgment. The righteous God does not ignore sin forever. When the wickedness of the inhabitants of Canaan had reached its fullness, God brought judgment upon them and used Israel as an instrument of that judgment, bringing His people into the land He had promised to them.

Dear brothers and sisters, our lives are short, so the span of time we can personally observe is very limited. God, however, sees history from an entirely different perspective. When people persist in evil, God may patiently allow them time, but when their wickedness reaches its fullness, His judgment will come. Therefore, we need to learn to see things from God’s perspective. God would use Israel to judge the wickedness of the Canaanites and bring His people into the land He had promised them. Yet the Israelites themselves still needed faith in order to go forward and possess that land.

Let us pray together: Dear Lord Jesus, Your best will for us is that we follow You by faith, trusting Your promises rather than depending on what we see around us. Yet when our faith is weak and we struggle to keep up with Your leading, we often settle for something less and seek only what You permit. Lord, have mercy on us.

Even when we find ourselves within what You have permitted, use those circumstances to train and strengthen our faith so that we may ultimately return to the promises of Your Word. Help us to walk by faith and not by sight. As we read the account of Israel spying out the Promised Land, help us learn from the example of Caleb and Joshua. Give us faith to see Your promises, trust them, and hold firmly to them. Bless the church in which You have placed me, and help us, together with all the saints, to learn the lessons of faith. May we follow Your leading closely and faithfully, and may Your church move forward into all that You have promised and prepared for us. We pray in the holy name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.