

Spies on a Mission in the Promised Land

Numbers 13:1-33 (text) • 1 Cor 10:1-11

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Dear Congregation of Christ: Do you remember who said these words during the American Revolution? “I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country.” It is said that these famous words were part of a speech by Nathan Hale before he was hanged by the British. Hale was a captain in the Continental Army who was on a spying mission when he was captured and hanged by the British army. He was only 21 then. While Nathan Hale was an American hero, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were traitors. The Rosenbergs were Communists who spied for the Soviet secret agency KGB during and after World War II, passing nuclear secrets to the Soviets. They were caught and then executed in 1953.

Spying on one’s enemies has existed ever since the ancient Chinese, Indian and Egyptian civilizations begun around the 30th century B.C. So it is not surprising that we find a spy story in the Book of Numbers, written in the 15th century B.C. Today, we come to the part where Israel reached the southern gates of Canaan, the land that God promised to give to their forefathers. Here, God commanded Moses to send out twelve spies to scout the land and its people. After Moses selected the spies and gave them mission goals, they went into the land and came back with a report of their findings to Moses. At the end of the chapter, we read how the spies debated among themselves on whether they should go in and conquer the land. The decision they would make at this crossroad would prove to be a major turning point in their history.

Today, we will dwell on the theme, “**SPIES ON A MISSION IN THE PROMISED LAND,**” under three headings: first, **Their Mission Goals;** second, **Their Mission Accomplished;** and third, **Their Mission Report.**

Their Mission Goals (verses 1-20)

Twelve tribal leaders were selected as the scouting team. This list of tribal leaders differs from that in Chapters 1–2. Most likely, younger and stronger leaders were needed for such a dangerous and physically demanding reconnaissance mission. In verse 16, one of the spies is Hoshea son of Nun, whom Moses later called Joshua, which means, he saves. Joshua is also the Hebrew name of Jesus, the one who came to save his people from their sins (Matt 1:21).

God gave them two main goals. They were to “*spy out the land of Canaan,*” and bring back a report concerning the quality of the land its inhabitants. What were they to look for? First, they were to see what kind of land it is, whether it is good or bad, plentiful or desert. Second, they were to find out what kind of people live in the land, whether they were big or small, strong or weak. Third, they were to assess what kind of cities they live in, whether they lived in tents like them, or live in fortified cities. This was a most difficult and dangerous mission God gave the spies, because if they were caught, they would surely and swiftly be executed, just like Nathan Hale.

Each one of us today has goals that we want to accomplish in our lives. Those who have families, your main goals are to provide plenty and comfort for your family and to raise your children well. Those who finished their studies and are starting their first job want to prosper in their chosen careers. A good goal for children is to be obedient to their parents and to get good grades in school. Even churches usually state their mission, which should primarily be the building up and nourishing of God's covenant people.

But what does the Bible say is the main and highest goal that God gave individual believers and the church? The answer to this question is found in Paul's commands, "*So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God*" (1 Cor 10:31), and "*Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him*" (Col 3:17). Whatever you do and whatever happens to you in this life, glorify God and wait for your future glorification. And be thankful to God in whatever circumstances which you find yourself.

Their Mission Accomplished (verses 21-24)

So the spies entered the land, risking their lives in the process. The spies covered a wide area, some 200 miles from the Negeb all the way to the north of present-day Damascus (v 21). One of the places they scouted was Hebron, a city located 20 miles south of Jerusalem. This city was the place of sojourning of and the burial place of their forefathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and their wives (Gen 49:29-31). What thoughts could the spies have been had as they went through the area, knowing that they were walking the same roads their forefathers walked? It was also in this place where God had promised the land to Abraham forever (Gen. 17:8).

Now the twelve spies actually saw with their own eyes what God had promised them even before they left Egypt. The land was so good and fertile that they even cut down a cluster of grapes, pomegranates and figs, so big and heavy that two men had to carry the fruits hanging from a pole (v 23). This is why they named the place Eshcol, which in Hebrew means "cluster." God was truly faithful to his promises!

Today, he is still faithful to the promises he has revealed to us in his Word, whether in good times or in bad. In good times, what are we to do? Give praise, thanksgiving and glory to him. In bad times, what are we to do? Pray for strength and perseverance to get through difficulties, and then give God praise, thanksgiving and glory, for he works everything for our good.

For God's faithfulness to all his promises, it was Israel's duty to bless him, as Moses commanded them to bless the Lord for giving them the good land (Deu 8:10). In the same way, it is also our duty to bless God as he proves time and again his faithfulness to his promises. We are to praise, thank and glorify God for the grace, mercy and lovingkindness he bestows upon his people.

The mission of the spies was not a quick one-day or one-week foray into enemy territory; they scouted the land for forty days. Next week, we will look at the significance of these forty days in relation to Israel's decision whether to obey or disobey God's command to enter Canaan.

Their Mission Report (verses 25-33)

After completing 40 days of reconnaissance, the twelve spies came back and reported back to the camp. Their report covers the goals of their mission in verses 17-20 and a summary of what they accomplished in verses 21-24. The only information we read in these verses were a list of places they explored and that the land was bountiful, with all kinds of fruits. The spies' report to Moses and their debate as to what their next step are given in more detail in verses 25-33. Here, they presented Moses with good news, then bad news.

First, the good news. The land itself was just as God had promised to Israel when they were still slaves in Egypt, *“a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey”* (Exo 3:8). Deuteronomy 8:7-9 gives a more detailed description of the abundance of the land:

“For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, flowing out in the valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, a land in which you will eat bread without scarcity, in which you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron, and out of whose hills you can dig copper.”

What beautiful and bountiful land God was giving them!

Now the bad news. The spies mentioned three things, and they exaggerated or even lied in all three. **First, the spies warned about the mighty Anakim.** These people were strong and big (v 28) because they were descendants of the renowned and gigantic Nephilim who lived before the flood (v 33). These people were so big that the spies seemed to be grasshoppers compared to these giants (v 33). Who were these Nephilim? To answer this question, we go back to the primeval history during Noah's days. In Genesis 6, the Nephilim were said to be descendants of the *“sons of God”* and the *“daughters of man.”* They were mighty and men of renown (v 4).

This passage is fascinating because of the mysterious identities of the characters mentioned here. Many explanations have been proposed by Biblical scholars. One interpretation sounds like Greek and Roman mythology. The *“sons of God”* were fallen angels who became god-men because they wanted the beautiful *“daughters of man”* for their wives. Their descendants became the mighty, gigantic Nephilim. This story sounds like the god Zeus producing the mightiest Greek warrior Hercules with a mortal woman named Alcmene.

But the most convincing interpretation is that *“the sons of God”* were descendants of the godly line of Adam's son Seth, and the *“daughters of man”* were women who descended from the ungodly line of Cain. Some of the men from the godly line of Seth intermarried with the beautiful women of the ungodly line of Cain. The children of this union were the Nephilim, mighty men of renown, were fierce and violent warriors who sowed fear in the ancient world. They contributed much to the great wickedness on earth in Noah's day which provoked God to destroy mankind by the Great Flood (Gen 6:7).

The Anakim were also the same people who lived in the Hebron area that Joshua later defeated after Israel finally entered the land (Jos 11:21; see also Deu 9:1-2). So it would appear that the spies' report about the Anakim's great size and power was exaggerated to sow fear into the hearts of the

Israelites so they would not have to fight those mighty Anakim warriors. Also, how could the Nephilim have had descendants living after the flood since they would all have perished in the flood?

Second, “the cities are fortified and very large.” Here, the spies were telling the truth, as confirmed by archaeological excavation of large and heavily-defended Canaanite cities of the Late Bronze Age. This is why Moses said that the cities were *“fortified up to heaven”* (Deut 9:1). And **third, the land devours its inhabitants.** Again, another lie. If the land was so harsh to its people, why did the spies describe it as a land of milk and honey? How can a land abounding in natural resources devour its inhabitants? How could a land be so inhospitable when it produced big and mighty people?

So the majority report by ten out of the twelve spies concluded with the bad news, *“We are not able to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we are”* (v 31).

But there was a minority report presented by two of the twelve spies: Caleb, and later in Chapter 14, Joshua. They agreed that the cities were heavily fortified, and the people were bigger and stronger. But their conclusion was diametrically opposed to that of the other ten spies, *“Let us go up at once and occupy it, for we are well able to overcome it”* (v 30).

How did Caleb and Joshua come up with a different conclusion when they saw the same thing as the other ten spies? Because they also saw something else that the others did not see. And this is God’s presence with them: *“He will bring us into this land... They are bread for us... God will not protect them... The Lord is with us.”* Instead of serving the Israelites to the Anakim as fried grasshoppers, God would feed the Anakim as bread to his people Israel!

But the ten spies did not believe God’s promises to them and to their fathers. They analyzed the situation only from their sinful, faithless human perspective, and as a result, their fear was exaggerated and magnified, and God’s power was minimized. In contrast, Caleb and Joshua magnified God’s word and believed God’s power, so their fear was minimized.

Dear friends, our text in 1 Corinthians 10 warns us, *“Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come.”* In these last days that began when Jesus first came, the apostle exhorts us to read, study and meditate on the difficult pilgrimage of Israel from the cursed land of slavery to the blessed land of promise. Sometimes, their faithfulness encourages us to be faithful. Other times, their unbelief and rebellion warn us that we will not enter eternal rest in our Promised Land if we too fall into the same unbelief and rebellion (Heb 4:6-11).

If you believe in him, he has good news for you. Jesus is your “spy” who has scouted your land of destiny. Because he is the Truth, nothing in his report is exaggerated or untrue. He knows everything about your Promised Land because he came down from there and he is there today. He assures you that your Promised Land is the heavenly city, a beautiful land abounding in God’s blessings and goodness. Its inhabitants are not wicked enemies you have to fight and conquer, but righteous friends with whom you will fellowship for eternity. An its fortifications do not just reach up to heaven, but the city is heaven itself, safe and secure from all evil (Rev 21:27).

But if you do not believe, he has terrifying bad news for you. Your promised land is a place of *“weeping and gnashing of teeth”* (Matt 13:42, 50), a place of eternal torment and fire that consumes yet does not kill (Rev 20:10). Worse, for all eternity, you will share this horrible place with wicked beings under judgment by a holy God. Its walls are unscalable and a great chasm exists between your land and the heavenly land, so that it is utterly impossible for you or anyone else cross over.

For you to be able to cross over into the Promised Land of God’s blessings and goodness, believe and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ today while there is still time. If you do, you do not have to face life’s challenges alone. Even better, when you look at your problems and you feel that things are hopeless, you will not fall into the same unbelief as the ten spies. And when you think that life is too hard and hopeless, Jesus will comfort you with his words of assurance, *“With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible”* (Matt 19:26). *Amen.*