



**Adult Sunday School Lesson Summary for August 9, 2009  
Released on Wednesday, August 5, 2009**

**“Dissatisfaction and Rebellion”**

**Lesson Text:** Numbers 14:1–12

**Background Scripture:** Numbers 14:1–25

**Devotional Reading:** Psalm 78:5–17

**Numbers 14:1–12**

**1** And all the congregation lifted up their voice, and cried; and the people wept that night.

**2** And all the children of Israel murmured against Moses and against Aaron: and the whole congregation said unto them, Would God that we had died in the land of Egypt! or would God we had died in this wilderness!

**3** And wherefore hath the Lord brought us unto this land, to fall by the sword, that our wives and our children should be a prey? were it not better for us to return into Egypt?

**4** And they said one to another, Let us make a captain, and let us return into Egypt.

**5** Then Moses and Aaron fell on their faces before all the assembly of the congregation of the children of Israel.

**6** And Joshua the son of Nun, and Caleb the son of Jephunneh, which were of them that searched the land, rent their clothes:

**7** And they spake unto all the company of the children of Israel, saying, The land, which we passed through to search it, is an exceeding good land.

**8** If the Lord delight in us, then he will bring us into this land, and give it us; a land which floweth with milk and honey.

**9** Only rebel not ye against the Lord, neither fear ye the people of the land; for they are bread for us: their defense is departed from them, and the Lord is with us: fear them not.

**10** But all the congregation bade stone them with stones. And the glory of the Lord appeared in the tabernacle of the congregation before all the children of Israel.

**11** And the Lord said unto Moses, How long will this people provoke me? and how long will it be ere they believe me, for all the signs which I have showed among them?

**12** I will smite them with the pestilence, and disinherit them, and will make of thee a greater nation and mightier than they.

**INTRODUCTION:**

The book of Numbers tells the crucial story of Israel’s odyssey from the bondage of Egypt to the freedom of the promised land of Canaan. It was not an easy journey. There were no hotels along the way, no 747s to whisk people about. It was a move that required utter trust in the Lord and in His appointed leader, Moses.

Today’s lesson focuses on a tragic turn of events in this story. It shows that Israel let the hardships and uncertainty of its situation turn into doubt and rebellion. The

result was the delay of entry into the Promised Land for a generation and an unnecessary sojourn in the wilderness for 40 years.

### **LESSON BACKGROUND:**

Time: about 1443 B.C.

Place: Kadesh

The first five books of the Bible (sometimes called *the Pentateuch*) tell the story of God's plan to create a people for Himself (Exodus 6:7). This plan included the selection of Abram (later renamed Abraham) as the man of faith to be the father of this nation (Genesis 15:6). Abraham's descendants multiplied greatly, but ended up in Egypt as a nation of slaves under the bondage of the Pharaoh. God's plan was far from complete - His chosen people were hardly a nation, and they were in the wrong place (Egypt). God had promised Abraham that they would inherit the land of Canaan (Genesis 15:18).

The Exodus story is the account of God's miraculous liberation of an entire people-group from the slavery imposed by the Egyptians. The Egyptian threat was finally put to rest by Israel's experience at the Red Sea. While in the Sinai Peninsula, the people received revelations from God that were intended to form them into His holy people. They were to be controlled by His law, worshiping at His holy tabernacle. We might say that most of the process of nation-building had then been accomplished. The identity of Israel was clear: a holy people whose God was the Lord.

The book of Numbers shows that God intended a three-part plan for His people: rescue from Egypt, reception of the law, and movement to a new homeland. Israelite spies indeed saw the richness of the land before them, describing it as flowing "with milk and honey" (Numbers 13:27). They brought back a cluster of grapes so large that it required two men to carry it (13:23).

While the report of the spies verified the richness of this land, the majority of the spies also reported that the residents were too formidable. The result was that the Israelites were terrified as they concentrated on the report of opposing armies rather than the report of a land with overflowing abundance.

There was a minority report as well. It came from 2 of the 12 spies. They were of the opinion that the time was ripe to sweep in and claim the land that God had promised them. Unfortunately, this minority opinion was drowned out by the fearful cries of the Israelite people in general. They believed that they had been led to a dead end and would be destroyed. We should remember that these were the same people who had watched God destroy the great army of the Egyptians in the waters of the Red Sea. However, divine deliverance from slavery did not seem to erase the vestiges of that mindset - the fearful Israelites faced backward toward Egypt, while the small minority faced forward toward Canaan.

The prize was within their grasp, and yet they let fear overcome faith. They listened to the opinion of 10 cowards rather than claim a spirit of boldness. This is the immediate background of today's lesson.

### **ANXIETY & REVOLT (Numbers 14:1-4)**

#### **1. What event preceded the murmuring of Numbers 14? (Numbers 14:1)**

The weeping and wailing of all the congregation of Israel had to do with events that are recorded in the preceding chapter of Numbers. At this point, the Israelites had been away from Egypt only two years at best. They had received the law at Mount Sinai, constructed the tabernacle as a place of worship, and journeyed to Kadesh-barnea in the northeastern part of the Sinai Peninsula, not far from the southern border of the Promised Land.

In preparation for an invasion of Canaan, God told Moses to choose twelve men, one from each tribe, to spy out the land (Num. 13:1-2). The purpose of this trek into Canaan was to assess whether the people there were "strong or weak, few or many" (vs. 18). Although their ancestors had lived in this land, Israel had spent the past four hundred years in Egypt, which allowed them no direct knowledge of the Promised Land.

Besides spying out the land with regard to how difficult it would be to conquer, the spies also needed to learn something about its productivity. As they carried back some of the fruit of the land, there was ample evidence that Canaan was indeed a land that flowed with milk and honey, a proverbial expression indicating great bounty.

While recognizing that the land was everything God had promised, the spies also took note of the fortified cities and the large stature of the Canaanites (Num. 13:28). Ten of the spies counseled against going in, saying that the land was unconquerable. However, the other two spies, Joshua and Caleb, believed that the land should be immediately attacked, concluding, "We are well able to overcome it" (vs. 30). Nevertheless, they were unable to convince the people to begin the invasion of Canaan.

Having come to the brink of entering the Land of Promise, this represented a major setback for Moses and Aaron. In fact, they now faced open rebellion against their authority.

## **2. Who bore the brunt of the grumbling of the Israelites? (vs. 2-3)**

After listening to the report of the unbelieving spies, the people began murmuring against Moses and Aaron. The Israelites felt it would have been better to have remained in Egypt or died on the journey, for now they would be slaughtered in battle.

It does not take many negative thinkers to affect the mind-set of a larger group, be it a church or a family. In this case, ten of the twelve spies felt that the task before them was too difficult. Joshua and Caleb, clearly in the minority, were written off by the people as incorrect in their assessment.

Considering the wonders these people had already seen - the ten plagues upon Egypt, the crossing of the Red Sea, and the miraculous provisions in the wilderness - it is difficult to understand how they could be swayed so quickly. It is understandable that they would be concerned about the safety of their families during an invasion of Canaan, but their behavior was an insult to God.

## **3. From the perspective of the people, what would have been preferable to invading Canaan?**

Even more astonishing is the fact that they felt returning to Egypt would actually be preferable to attempting an invasion of the land before them. "Now the rebellion reaches its climax. Appalled by the spies' description of the Promised Land, the people break down completely. . . . They reflect that anything they have experienced up to now will be better than Canaan. . . . Time had already dulled their more bitter memories of Egypt, and in an earlier rebellion they had looked back on it with a certain longing (cf. 11:5, 18, and 20). But this time they actually propose returning to Egypt, thereby completely rejecting the whole plan of redemption" (Wenham, *Numbers*, InterVarsity).

Think of what the phrase *return into Egypt* really implies: in Egypt, the people of Israel were slaves under brutal taskmasters. The Israelites are not now reminiscing about "the good old days." Their base fear is that their men will be killed in battle in the current situation, leaving their families as *prey* for their victorious enemies. Thus a return to Egypt is seen as the lesser of two evils.

Now, having been convinced that the conquest of Canaan was an impossible task, the people moved from murmuring to outright rebellion. Instead of trying to see the situation from another perspective or even discussing the matter, they cried for new leadership to lead them back to Egypt.

#### **4. In what circumstances does our fear mirror that of the Israelites? How do we correct this?**

Too often we fear the worst in a difficult situation and then take action based on a perceived very-worst-case scenario. The result is an overly defensive mindset. When that happens, we do not move forward spiritually. The Israelites would have moved forward in faith had they paused to reflect on how God had delivered them to that point (the plagues, the parting of the Red Sea, provision in the wilderness, etc.). We are to use those very examples of deliverance to step out on faith yet today (1 Corinthians 10:1-13).

Peter was able to walk on the water at first, but then fear and doubt took hold. As a result, he began to sink (Matthew 14:28-31). When we focus on Jesus, faith can prevail; when we focus on negative circumstances, fear takes over. Perhaps our fear means that we don't know Jesus as well as we should. The Israelites' extreme fear may indicate that they did not truly know God.

#### **TRUSTING & BLESSING (Numbers 14:5-9)**

#### **5. What was Moses and Aaron's instinctive reaction to this popular uprising? (v. 5)**

Learning that the people wanted to select a new leader for a journey back to the land of bondage, Moses and Aaron prostrated themselves in front of the congregation. The reason for this was "not to plead for their lives, but to express their awe at the sacrilegious blasphemy of the people. . . . Moses and Aaron, sensing the presence of God, fall to the ground in fear at what he is about to do" (Wenham).

#### **6. Which spies tried to convince the Israelites to rethink their decision? (vs. 6,7)**

The only spies who had seen the conquest of Canaan with eyes of faith were Joshua and Caleb. Since they believed that the Lord was able to deliver their enemies into their hands, they were convinced that the task before them was quite doable. Because of their faith, when the adult population of Israel was later condemned to die in the desert, only Joshua and Caleb were spared this fate (v. 30).

Joshua and Caleb were greatly disturbed by Israel's unwillingness to trust God and by their subsequent desire to return to Egypt. Their consternation manifested itself in rending, or tearing, their clothing, which was a sign of great distress among the ancients (Gen. 37:29, 34; Josh. 7:6; Judges 11:35; 1 Kings 21:27).

After this very visible sign of grief before the assembled people, the two faithful spies tried to reason with them.

Emphasizing how wonderful the land that God was giving them was, Joshua and Caleb wanted Israel to realize what they were passing up by deciding to return to Egypt, the land of their bondage.

As Christians, we may use a variety of approaches to convince others of the need to follow Christ, which ultimately leads to heaven (John 14:6). In spite of the fact that sickness, pain, and death will be nonexistent in heaven (Rev. 21:4), many remain unmoved by appeals to obey the gospel. They allow the pleasures of this life to keep the Word of God from producing fruit in their lives (Luke 8:14).

Israel's refusal to trust God caused them to forfeit the Promised Land for their generation, but failure to trust Christ results in missing the promised eternal rest of

heaven (Heb. 3:1 - 4:10). "Let us labor therefore to enter into that rest, lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief" (4:11).

### **7. Whom were the people really rebelling against? (vs. 8,9)**

Israel needed to realize that deciding to go back to Egypt was not just a rejection of Moses and Aaron's leadership, nor was it simply being cynical about Joshua and Caleb's visionary spirit. It was a rejection of the Lord Himself!

Continuing to try to convince the people to change their viewpoint, Joshua and Caleb reminded them that if God was pleased with them, the land would indeed be subdued. This land that flowed with milk and honey was the very land God had long ago promised to Abraham's posterity (Gen. 15:18; Exod. 6:2-8; Deut. 1:6-8). To refuse this gift was evidence of both unbelief and insolence.

Joshua and Caleb equate the Israelites' *fear* of the *people* of Canaan with rebellion against God himself. If the assistance of God is spurned, then the people should be afraid. These two spies know that this does not need to be the case. The adversaries of Israel are as *bread* for them. The territory and influence of those in Canaan is ready to be eaten up and claimed by the people of Israel. Those inhabitants will not be able to stand against the power of the Lord, so there is no reason to fear.

Since the people of Israel had no trained army, we can sympathize with their reluctance to attack fortified cities. But as Joshua and Caleb pointed out, the Canaanites had no defense against the power of the Lord God of Israel. Considering what the children of Israel had already seen God do, if anything, they should have been overconfident, not fearful!

### **8. What actions and attitudes of Joshua and Caleb can we live by today?**

Joshua and Caleb demonstrated a strong faith in God's power to lead them into the Promised Land and to help them conquer enemies. They did not see their spying task in terms of answering the question "Can it be done?" but rather "How will we do it?" That's a lesson for today. When God says *do it*, the depth of unfaithfulness is to ask "Can it be done?"

God expects us not only to show faith in Him, but also to demonstrate courage before those whom we lead. Numbers 14:10 shows us the mob was ready to kill Joshua and Caleb. These two undoubtedly were aware of that hostile climate even before they spoke out. Yet they spoke out anyway. These two were radically committed to trusting and following God.

### **REBELLION & PUNISHMENT (Numbers 14:10-12)**

#### **9. Not willing to listen to the believing spies, what did the people want to do to them? (v. 10)**

The people were not persuaded to seize the opportunity before them. The emotion of the people was so strong that they turn into a murderous mob, ready to kill by stoning those who oppose their will. Presumably this refers to Joshua and Caleb. It is within the realm of possibility, however, that Moses and Aaron were also among those singled out for stoning, which was the preferred way to carry out the death penalty in those days.

"This is not simply a mob-lynching. The congregation had judicial authority, and stoning was reserved for the punishment of major religious crimes... and sins within the family which symbolize breaches of the covenant. . . . Joshua and Caleb have accused them of rebelling against the Lord (9); the congregation rejects this charge as false and proposes to exact the appropriate penalty for false witness" (Wenham).

#### **10. How did the Lord God intervene on behalf of those who had faith in Him?**

Before the people could carry out their evil designs against Moses, Aaron, Joshua and Caleb, "the glory of the Lord appeared in the tabernacle of the congregation before all the children of Israel" (Num. 14:10). In this way, God intervened directly on behalf of these men of God to preserve their lives and vindicate them in the presence of Israel.

The four are saved by the Lord's miraculous intervention: the mob is stopped cold by an appearance of the *glory of the Lord*. This takes place at *the tabernacle*, which was probably the site of the earlier confrontation too. God's glory does not shine way off in the distance, but right in the middle of the people. The witnesses to this glory include *all the children of Israel*.

### **11. What charges does God bring against Israel? What did God contemplate doing with Israel? (vs. 11-12)**

God brings two charges against Israel. First, they have provoked Him, meaning they have called forth His wrath. Second, they have stubbornly refused to *believe* Him, to trust Him. God has given them ample evidence of His power through many *signs*, but their unbelief persists. God rhetorically asks Moses *how long* He should put up with these acts of rebellion (v. 11). This situation cannot continue.

Considering all that the Lord had done for Israel, we can certainly understand why He was provoked by the attitudes and actions of the people. The bottom line was the fact that the people did not truly believe God. Had they trusted in His power and promises, they would have been willing to obey Him and march into the Promised Land.

That God performed many miracles in the presence of the people of Israel should have been convincing enough. While the manifest reason for miracles was to help and heal, their primary purpose was to create faith or strengthen the faith of Israel. In John's conclusion to his Gospel, he reminded his readers that the record of Christ's miracles was to convince people that "Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God" (20:31). But even the most stupendous miracles will not convince those who reject the Word of God (Luke 16:31).

At this point, the Lord was so fed up with Israel that He was considering destroying them by plague. God contemplated destroying Israel and taking away their inheritance of the land of Canaan. He will abandon them in the wilderness to suffer and die. This does not mean that God will abandon His promise to Abraham, though. God proposes that He will raise up a new nation from the descendants of Moses himself, and thereby continue His promise.

### **12. How did Moses respond to God's plan to destroy Israel?**

Had we been in Moses' sandals, we might have thought this was a good plan and welcomed it. Moses, however, had a deep love for these people in spite of their failures and foibles. As on other occasions, Moses interceded on behalf of the people and pleaded with the Lord to give them another chance.

In the verses immediately following the lesson text (14:13-19), Moses argued that if God destroyed these people, it might be seen by their enemies as weakness on the part of the Lord. They might conclude that "because the Lord was not able to bring this people into the land which he swore unto them, therefore he hath slain them in the wilderness" (Num. 14:16). Reminding the Lord that He was "longsuffering, and of great mercy, forgiving iniquity and transgression" (v. 18), Moses sought pardon for the people. Successful in his intercession, Moses' request was granted. Because of their refusal to believe, however, the rebellious people would die in the desert (vs. 22-23).

What could have been a relatively brief journey from Egypt to Canaan was about to turn into a forty-year trek. God decreed that for each day the spies had been in the land, the Israelites would pay the consequences of their rebellion a full

year; thus, they would spend forty years finding out what it was like to have God be against them rather than for them.

**PRACTICAL POINTS:**

1. Focusing on our problems rather than on God's power can lead to outrageous statements and hysterical reactions (Num. 14:1-4).
2. Leaders are placed in an impossible situation when people lose faith (vs. 5-6).
3. Looking at a challenging situation from God's perspective makes all the difference in how we handle it (vs. 7-9).
4. Words of faith only arouse more anger in those who are hardened in unbelief (v. 10).
5. If anything tries God's patience, it is stubborn unbelief in the face of His continued provision and care (vs. 11-12).

**CONCLUSION:**

The Lord had used Moses and Aaron to lead them to the edge of the land of Canaan, the territory that had been promised to them through their ancestor, Abraham. Yet when they were on the cusp of a mighty victory, they gave in to fear and doubt and suffered a national defeat that took 40 years to overcome.

This lesson shows us another side of the Promised Land quest. Is it possible that we, like Israel, won't recognize the Promised Land even when it stares us in the face? Are we forever trapped in a cycle of distrust and despair, leading to a desire to denounce God and the church and go our own way? Or is it possible that we are in the Promised Land right now but it doesn't seem like it because life is not as easy as we thought it would be?

Truly trusting God is very difficult at times. There is a central human desire to be in control of our situation, to call our own shots. Israel, in the bleak wilderness and facing strong adversaries, yielded to this desire and proposed moving away from God and making their own way. Israel had lost sight of the biblical principle that trust in God brings blessing.

All of us have experienced periods of doubt in our lives. We know firsthand the dilemmas of uncertainty, the perils of a lack of confidence. The Bible teaches that doubt is the enemy of faith (John 20:27). The sorry history of Israel in this lesson shows how doubt led to a direct challenge of God, with disastrous results.

Being a faithful follower of Jesus allows us to claim His promises. It does not allow us to expect that our lives will be devoid of hardship or frustration. The book of Joshua shows that Israel had to wage war in order to claim the promised land of Canaan. But they waged that war with God on their side, and eventually the land was theirs. Our lives may seem to be battlegrounds, but God fights for us too. We, the church, are heirs to the promise (Galatians 3:29). Let us learn from Israel and not follow their example (Psalm 106:24). Let us believe God's Word and not despise the promises that He has given us today.

**PRAYER:**

Holy Father, we believe that You have prepared a place for us, a marvelous land of promise flowing with milk and honey. Yet our vision of these blessings is dimmed by the daily challenges that test our faith. May our doubts never progress to rebellion. May we always rest with assurance in Your promises and Your love for us. We pray this in the name of Your greatest blessing, Jesus Christ, Your only Son. Amen.

**THOUGHT TO REMEMBER:**

Never rebel against God. Always trust Him.

**ANTICIPATING NEXT WEEK'S LESSON:**

Study Numbers 20:1-13 for next week's lesson: "Disregarding God's Directive". The lesson will focus on Moses' punishment for striking the rock in the wilderness to get water for Israel. Because Moses did not show trust in God, he was kept from entering Canaan.

**Lesson Summarized By:**

Renee Little  
Jesus Is All Ministries  
[www.jesusisall.com](http://www.jesusisall.com)

**WORKS CITED:**

Summary and commentary derived from Standard Lesson Commentary  
Copyright© 2009 by permission of Standard Publishing.

Reprinted by permission of The Incorporated Trustees of the Gospel Worker Society,  
Union Gospel Press, P.O. Box 6059, Cleveland, Ohio 44101. (Web site:  
<http://www.uniongospelpress.com/>)

The Pulpit Commentary, Spence-Jones, H. D. M. (Hrsg.), Bellingham, WA : Logos  
Research Systems, Inc.

The KJV Parallel Bible Commentary, by Nelson Books

Holman Bible Dictionary, Holman Bible Publishers