

Numbers 13:25-33

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After their forty-day exploration of the land of Canaan, the spies reported back to Moses and the others. They showed the produce they brought back (grapes and other fruit), showing that the land was very good. They also reported that the people who were living in the land were big and powerful and that the cities were heavily fortified. Scariest of all were the descendants of Anak, who were very tall and very strong. The land looked as though anyone who tried to conquer it would perish in the effort.

The spies had now completed their 300 mile round trip through the land of Canaan, and then *they returned from spying out the land at the end of forty days* (v. 25). Immediately, *they proceeded to come to Moses and Aaron and to all the congregation of the sons of Israel in the wilderness of Paran, at Kadesh* (v. 26). Kadesh is called “Kadesh-barnea” in Numbers 32:8. In verse 21, Kadesh was said to be in *the wilderness of Zin*, and here it states that it was in *the wilderness of Paran*. It probably was on the southern side of Paran and the northern side of Zin, about fifty miles (83 km) south of modern-day Be’er Sheva (Beersheba).

Upon entering the camp, they went directly to Moses and Aaron, to whom *they brought back word to them and to all the congregation and showed them the fruit of the land*. The spies told Moses that they *went in to the land where you sent us* (v. 27). They confirmed that the Promised Land *certainly does flow with milk and honey* by showing them that *this is its fruit*. By saying this the spies admitted that what God had promised was true.

But then they told them what they considered to be the bad news. They started by saying *Nevertheless* (v. 28). The Hebrew (“‘epes ki”) is a strong adversative that could be translated “notwithstanding” or “BUT” in capital letters. The idea here is that, though the land was very good, there were huge obstacles in the way. The report will now discount God’s promise that He would provide for the nation to overcome these obstacles.

The spies then listed a few of these obstacles,

- First, *the people who live in the land are strong*. This would make them formidable opponents on the battlefield.
- *The cities are fortified and very large*. The word for *fortified* (Hebrew “batsur”) implies that the cities in Canaan were so fortified that they were unassailable. That the cities were *very large* also discouraged the spies.
- *Moreover, we saw the descendants of Anak there*. The *descendants of Anak*, a family of a people known as the Nephilim (see v. 33), were apparently very tall and very strong, and thus would make them imposing warriors.
- To make things worse, *Amalek is living in the land of the Negev* (v. 29). The Amalekites had savagely attacked the Israelites soon after they left Egypt (Exodus 17:8 – 16). They were descendants of Esau (Genesis 36:12) and had developed a hatred for their relatives

that were descendants of Jacob (meaning Israel). In order to conquer the land, they would have to confront the Amalekites again.

- The spies then reported that *the Hittites and the Jebusites and the Amorites are living in the hill country*. The *Hittites* were originally from Anatolia (modern-day Turkey), but many of them had settled in Canaan. Not much is known about the *Jebusites* except that they were the inhabitants of the area around Jerusalem and were considered part of the Amorites (Joshua 10:5). The *Amorites* had settled in the hill country of Canaan from Aram (modern-day Syria) possibly before 2000 BC.
- In addition, the spies told Moses that *the Canaanites are living by the sea and by the side of the Jordan*. The *Canaanites* were the native people of Canaan. Because of past conquests by other groups, they only lived *by the sea and by the side of the Jordan*. The *sea* is the Mediterranean, and *the Jordan* is a reference to the Jordan River valley.

The spies seemed upset because it appeared that the entire Promised Land—the Negev, the hill country, the land by the sea, and the Jordan River valley—was inhabited by people that could not be driven out. There were also cities that they thought could not be taken. The majority of the spies agreed that the idea of the Israelites conquering the land was a fantasy.

But not all the spies believed this. Caleb, one of the spies (v. 6), had a different opinion than the others. After the negative report was given, *Caleb quieted the people before Moses and said, “We should by all means go up and take possession of it, for we will surely overcome it”* (v. 30). The phrase *by all means* (Heb. “‘aloh na‘aleh”) is emphatic. Caleb is saying with strong language that the Israelites “most certainly” should *go up and take possession of* the land.

He continued to use intense language when he said confidently that *we will surely overcome it*. The phrase *surely overcome* uses the same Hebrew construct (“yakhol nukhal”) to convey his contention that the people were “more than capable” of overcoming any and all the challenges they might face when conquering the land. Caleb was very confident of victory.

Caleb’s confidence did not sway the others. Contradicting him, *the men who had gone up with him said, “We are not able to go up against the people”* (v. 31). The reason *the men* (ten of them, for Joshua aligned with Caleb, as seen in chapter 14) did not believe in Israelite victory was that their enemies *are too strong for us*. The Hebrew could also be translated, “they are stronger than we are.” In saying this, they are also saying “Our God is not strong enough to deliver us” even though they had watched God destroy the Egyptian army.

The majority opinion prevailed, *so they gave out to the sons of Israel a bad report of the land which they had spied out* (v. 32). The *bad report* (Heb. “dibba”) was one that was slanderous, defaming, and generally evil.

Their report stated that *the land through which we have gone, in spying it out, is a land that devours its inhabitants*. This would give the people the idea that the land itself was an obstacle. They said this in spite of the grapes they brought back, and there is no mention that they showed the grapes to the people. Thus, the ten spies appear to have omitted any positive reference to the land, its beauty, or its abundance.

Not only was the land deadly, according to the ten spies, but also *all the people whom we saw in it are men of great size*. They were a formidable enemy, and the Israelites would have little or no chance of being victorious over them, according to their assessment.

To instill even more dread, the spies told the people that *there also we saw the Nephilim* (v. 33). The meaning of the word *Nephilim* (which only occurs here and Genesis 6:4) is disputed, but it could refer to those who were great warriors. Others think that it could mean “tyrants.” Regardless of the precise meaning, it appears that the *Nephilim* had a notorious reputation of being tall, fierce, and cruel. Its use here by the spies was to create overwhelming dread in the hearts of the people.

Having mentioned the Anakites earlier as inhabitants of the land (vv. 22, 28), the spies amplified the Israelites’ fear by stating that *the sons of Anak are part of the Nephilim*.

To discourage the people even further, they used a hyperbole. They exaggerated the situation by saying that they *became like grasshoppers in their own sight, and so they were in the sight* of the Anakites. This emphasizes to a ridiculous degree how small the spies felt compared to the tall, mighty inhabitants of the land, as small as *grasshoppers*. They seem to be saying that it would be utter foolishness to fight a battle they could not possibly win for a land that could not possibly be a good place to live.

The ten spies forgot that the LORD promised this land to them, thus ensuring victory no matter how big the challenge (Exodus 6:2 – 4). The spies looked at the situation from a purely human standpoint and forgot (or ignored) the fact that the LORD was on their side. Their lack of faith in the promise and grace of the LORD is striking here.

The fact that Joshua and Caleb provided a good report, only two of twelve, might reflect the biblical principle of the faithful remnant. The Lord seeks to greatly reward those of His people who are willing to walk by faith (Hebrews 11:6).

Biblical Text

²⁵ When they returned from spying out the land, at the end of forty days, ²⁶ they proceeded to come to Moses and Aaron and to all the congregation of the sons of Israel in the wilderness of Paran, at Kadesh; and they brought back word to them and to all the congregation and showed them the fruit of the land. ²⁷ Thus they told him, and said, “We went in to the land where you sent us; and it certainly does flow with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. ²⁸ Nevertheless, the people who live in the land are strong, and the cities are fortified *and* very large; and moreover, we saw the descendants of Anak there. ²⁹ Amalek is living in the land of the Negev and the Hittites and the Jebusites and the Amorites are living in the hill country, and the Canaanites are living by the sea and by the side of the Jordan.” ³⁰ Then Caleb quieted the people before Moses and said, “We should by all means go up and take possession of it, for we will surely overcome it.” ³¹ But the men who had gone up with him said, “We are not able to go up against the people, for they are too strong for us.” ³² So they gave out to the sons of Israel a bad report of the land which they had spied out, saying, “The land through which we have gone, in spying it out, is a land that devours its inhabitants; and all the people whom we saw in it are men of *great size*. ³³ There

also we saw the Nephilim (the sons of Anak are part of the Nephilim); and we became like grasshoppers in our own sight, and so we were in their sight.”