

Numbers, Chapters 13-14 / The Spies View the Land

Read Numbers 13:1-3

The sending of spies was a common practice in the Near East. From Deuteronomy 1:22-23, we know that the sending of spies was at the people's request, and was therefore prompted by God's grace. The spies were "heads" of their tribes, but the list of names is different from the names given for the leaders of the tribes in the lists earlier in Numbers. The spies were likely younger men, able to go on the 40-day journey and return quickly.

vs. 16. "Moses called Hoshea, the son of Nun, Joshua." The significance of Joshua is hinted at here in the two versions of his name. Hoshea means salvation. Joshua means "the Lord saves." Jesus is the Greek form of Joshua.

Read Numbers 13:17-24

Moses gives the spies specific instructions, which they follow. The journey from the wilderness of Zin to the northernmost point of the land was 250 miles each way. *See map.*

On their way back south, they came to Hebron, about 20 miles south of Jerusalem. Hebron was very significant as the burial place of the patriarchs and their wives (see Genesis 23) and the place where God had promised the land to Abraham forever (see Genesis 17:8). Their ancestors had left Hebron a trading place for shepherds and herdsmen, and they were amazed to find it a fortified city.

In the land they see Anakites, descendants of Anak, who were men of great stature. The valley where the grapes were cut is near Hebron, so the spies likely cut the fruit on their way back out of the land. The size of the cluster of grapes, which required two men to carry, indicated the goodness of the land.

Read Numbers 13:25-33

The first part of the spies' report is accurate, but in verse 33, they exaggerated, saying the Anakites were Nephilim (the mighty men of old – see Genesis 6:4), and that they were as small as grasshoppers by comparison.

Read Numbers 14:1-12

What are the two sides of this debate? What arguments do Joshua and Caleb make?

vs. 10: What ends the debate? What is the punishment of stoning reserved for?

vs. 11: Why does the Lord interpret the people's fear as contempt of Him? What is the nature of the sin here?

Consider that in battle, some of the Israelites may have been injured or killed. Does that excuse their disobedience?

Application: Read Acts 5:17-41

Read Numbers 14:13-19

God's judgment (I will make a great nation from you), and Moses's intercession, closely parallels their conversation following the golden calf. Moses interceded by reminding God it was to His glory to spare the people, quoting God's own promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob back to Him. See Ex. 32:11-13.

Here, again, the people rebel despite many miraculous signs and wonders. But their rebellion is worse even than their worship of the golden calf, because it comes after the Lord had disciplined them many times over the past year, and after they have recommitted themselves to obedience. As with the golden calf, Moses again intercedes first by arguing that God's reputation will be affected if He destroys the people, and second by reminding God of His character (slow to anger, etc.), quoting God's own description of Himself (see Ex. 20:6; 34:6-7).

Read Numbers 14:20-38

vs. 20: God pardons the people, except for the 10 spies who delivered a bad report, who perished immediately, vs. 38.

"All those 20 years and older" – was the group commissioned to fight in God's army (Num 1:3). The story of the spies illustrates an important principle: when God forgives sin, he does not always eliminate the consequences of sin. In the case of Israel, God's forgiveness meant that they remained the people of God, in a corporate sense. Yet the individual sinners still suffered for their sin: they did not enter Canaan, but died in the wilderness.

Read Numbers 14:39-45

Now that God's pleasure and strength is removed from the people, the assault on Canaan is doomed to failure.