

# Obstacles or Opportunities?

August 6, 2017

This morning we are beginning a new series looking at the “Not So” Heroes of the OT. And this is good for at least two reasons. First, we tend to gravitate toward the Gospels and the life of Jesus as described in the NT. So we don’t often hear these OT stories. But second, in these stories, we find how God brings about his will through imperfect people. Or as the old saying goes, “God can draw a straight line with a crooked stick.” And that my friends, should give hope to all of us.

So here we go, and right off the bat, we’re in unfamiliar territory. You probably can’t remember the last sermon you heard from the book of Numbers, and I know I’ve never preached one. And that might be because it’s not an easy read. In some ways, it’s like reading a catalogue—there are all these lists, all these particulars about the layout of the camp, and the duties of the Levites, that it’s easy to get lost in the details. So we need to zoom out and orient ourselves.

When our passage begins, more than a year has passed since God freed the people from slavery in Egypt. For most of that time, they have been camped at the base of Mt. Sinai. During this time, they have experienced God’s provision, protection, and punishment. They have experienced his compassion—his loving kindness—and his righteous anger firsthand. They have received God’s Law and built the tabernacle, symbolizing that God is present with them. Now after counting the military aged males and establishing an order of march, they are drawing near to the Promised Land—the land that God promised to give to Abraham’s descendants way back in Genesis (Gen. 15:17-20). Before they enter, God allows them to conduct a “leader’s recon” (Num. 13:1-2 & Deut. 1:22-23) Moses selects 12 men (one from each tribe) and gives them instructions to “see what the land is, and whether the people who dwell in it are strong or weak, whether they are few or many, and whether the land that they dwell in is good or bad, and whether the cities that they dwell in are camps or strongholds, and whether the land is rich or poor... [so] be of good courage and bring some of the fruit of the land” (Num. 13:18-20).

*Numbers 13:25-14:4*

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At the end of forty days they returned from spying out the land. 26 And they came to Moses and Aaron and to all the congregation of the people of Israel in the wilderness of Paran, at Kadesh. They brought back word to them and to all the congregation, and showed them the fruit of the land. And they told him, “We came to the land to which you sent us. It flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. However, the people who dwell in the land are strong, and the cities are fortified and very large. And besides, we saw the descendants of Anak there...

**Read Numbers 13:25-14:4/ Pray**

**Reconnaissance**

A few months before my last deployment, myself and a small number of Marines from our unit boarded a plane headed to Afghanistan for our “leaders’ recon.” It had already been a grueling work-up, full of long days and several week-long training exercises. At the time, our daughter Clara was barely a year old, and I hated to leave her and Melanie again. And yet, as a Company Commander who was responsible for the lives of my Marines, I knew it was necessary. I wanted to see what we were up against; I wanted to sit down with the Marines we would be replacing and hear first-hand about the challenges they were facing. I wanted to see the ground for myself, and learn about the enemy we would be fighting. Now a trip like that is not without its dangers. It’s not like there was a sign on the side of our HMMWVs saying “don’t shoot...we’re the new guys.” Even so, it was nothing compared to the danger the 12 spies faced. During our reconnaissance, I spent less than a week on the ground in Afghanistan; in fact, most of what I saw was out the side of a helicopter. Moreover, I had access to all kinds of maps and satellite imagery. The spies enjoyed none of these advantages, and frankly, they had a much more difficult mission. Unlike us, they couldn’t just zoom over it. Instead they had to do it the hard way. It’s easy to miss this because most of us have little appreciation for the distance and terrain they had to cover. During the span of forty days, they covered about 500 miles, crossing both arid and mountainous terrain. Now think of the kind of men it took to do this...this was not a mission for the faint of heart. To be caught was to be killed. To be successful, then, required incredible bravery, resourcefulness, and resilience. That’s why they were greeted as heroes when they returned. And as heroes their report carried a lot of weight.

**Report:**

Now Moses and the people would have been eagerly awaiting their return. Moses wanted to show off the fruit of the land so that the people could see for themselves that it was indeed a good land. And the people—particularly the soldiers—wanted to know what they were up against. Yet it’s interesting to me that, as far as we can tell, Moses made no attempt to pull them aside, and get the inside scoop. He’s not afraid of their report, for God had already promised to give them the land. So he doesn’t censor them; he doesn’t sanitize their report. He trusts them to give an honest account of what they saw and experienced. And initially, their report seems fair and balanced. After all, they did what Moses asked, moving from south to north, canvassing the land. They even bring back some of its fruit, saying “We came to the land to which you sent us. It flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit” (13:27). Notice what is going on here. The spies are not suggesting that the land isn’t good. It’s very good. In fact, it’s *too* good.

A few years ago Melanie and I were looking to buy our first house. We were moving from Pennsylvania back to Jacksonville, NC. After deciding on a real estate agent, we made the long drive down to see some houses she had found for us. Well, the first house we walked into was amazing, but

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it was also WAY out of our league. Now maybe she thought we'd be so smitten with it that we would expand our budget, but all it really did was frustrate us. For we knew it was out of reach.

So this big cluster of fruit they bring back is little more than salt in the wound. It's a twist of the knife saying here it is but you can't have it. But there's more to it than that. See there's a subtle shift in language here that's important. Stretching back to God's covenant with Abraham, this land has always been described as "the land that God will give you." For God promised not only to make Israel is people, but to give them a land. Yet here the spies call it "the land to which you sent us" (13:27). See they've lost sight of the promise; now they only see the obstacles. The people are strong; the cities are large and fortified; and every square inch of it—it seems—is already taken: "the Amalekites dwell in the land of the Negeb. The Hittites, the Jebusites, and the Amorites dwell in the hill country. And the Canaanites dwell by the sea, and along the Jordan" (13:28).

Now these obstacles were real. The people were strong, and known for their fighting ability. In a time when combat was usually hand to hand, size mattered. And the Anak—literally the "long necked ones" were known for their height. Not only this, but the cities were well protected. They were fortified—hard to penetrate. And an entrenched defender is usually worth ten attackers. Furthermore, the land was already occupied. There was already competition for the available resources, and no one was going to play nice just to make room for the Israelites. They were going to fight for it.

This is probably a good place to stop and ask the question: How do we respond to obstacles? When a brighter future seems out of reach? Do we kick the ground and curse our circumstances? Do we play the "if only" game? *If I only I could...If only they would...If only that hadn't happened...If only I could go back, press rewind, get a do-over...* But "if only" doesn't change anything. And it can keep us from seeing the bigger picture. Instead of overcoming, we just feel overwhelmed.

### **Rebuttal:**

In times like this, the easiest thing in the world is to panic. It's easy to be overwhelmed by the bad news. That's why Caleb has to quiet the people (13:30). Before Moses can say a word, before he can remind them of God's promise, they are already up in arms. Yet Caleb, one of the spies, who walked where they walked and saw what they saw, has a different response. He doesn't deny the difficulty; he doesn't dispute the facts. But he's able to see beyond the obstacles; he also sees the opportunities. "Let us go up at once and occupy it, for we are well able to overcome it" (13:30).

Now I doubt that the name Chesty Puller will mean anything to most of you. But if you are a Marine, then you know all about Col. Lewis Puller because he's the most decorated Marine in history. And he was a man who wasn't afraid of a challenge. At the height of the Korean War, his regiment came under surprise attack from Chinese forces at the Battle of Chosin Reservoir. Within a short time, his Marines were surrounded. Chesty told his men "this simplifies things. They are in front of us, behind us, and we are flanked on both sides by an enemy that outnumbers us 29:1. They can't get away from us now!"



Surprisingly, he was right. Not because the challenges weren't real. They were all around them. But Chesty had learned the lessons of the past. Having fought in WWII, we had passed these lessons on to his Marines, and he knew what they could do. They not only fought their way out, but they destroyed numerous Chinese divisions along the way.

Yet Caleb's confidence is not in the 600,000 fighting-aged men. His confidence is in the Lord. He trusts that God will keep his promise, that he will give them this land. A few verses later he says, "If the Lord delights in us, he will bring us into this land and give it to us, a land that flows with milk and honey. Only do not rebel against the Lord. And do not fear the people of the land, for they are bread for us. Their protection is removed from them, and the Lord is with us; do not fear them" (14:8-9).

Caleb's confidence in future victory was not a pipedream, but was grounded in what God already had done. He hasn't forgotten the Red Sea crossing, the manna from heaven. Yet the others seem to be plagued by a fear-induced memory loss.

### **Rejection:**

Notice how quickly they reject Caleb's proposal. In fact, the longer they think about it, the more impossible it seems. They can see the obstacle, but they can't see beyond it.

When I was deployed to Iraq, we conducted most of our raids at night. The idea was to catch the enemy by surprise, preferably while they were still asleep. To maintain the element of surprise, we tried to use the darkness to our advantage. You see this in most of the modern war movies. A group of guys are all geared up, and right before they launch, they pull down their night vision goggles, and the world goes green. What you don't realize, however, is that this changes a lot more than the color. NVGs mess with your depth perception, until everything looks closer and bigger than it actually is. They also create a kind of tunnel vision. So you not only lose perspective, but you lose your peripheral vision, until all that you can see is what's right in front of you.

That's exactly what happened to most of the spies. Fear has warped their perspective. Instead of a good land, now it's a "land that devours its inhabitants" (13:32). Instead of a strong opponent, now they face giants. Even their self-understanding has changed. They've gone from God's chosen people, heirs to the promises of Abraham to mere grasshoppers (13:33). They feel insignificant, powerless.

"We are not able to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we are" (13:31). They are defeated before they've even begun. Their fear has taken over, and has blinded them to God's presence and work among them.

Now the evidence was all around them. The tabernacle which symbolized God's presence was at the center of their camp. And whenever they set out, the priests carried the Ark of the Covenant before them, to show that God went before them. And every day there was a cloud to guide them by day, and

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fire in the sky to guide them at night. Yet in this moment, that all goes out the window. They forget God's faithfulness.

That's why this is described as an "unfavorable" report. A better translation for "unfavorable" is evil or slanderous, because they are speaking evil of a land that God has already deemed good (Ex. 3:8) and suggesting that God cannot do the very thing he has promised.

### **Rebellion:**

Notice where their fear leads them. Instead of moving forward into the future God has promised, they retreat into the past. After a night of hand-wringing they cry, "Would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?" And they said to one another, "Let us choose a leader and go back to Egypt (14:3-4). Frankly, that probably wasn't too hard, for there are always plenty who want to take you back the way you came. After all, that road is well marked. It's familiar. Yet it's a road that leads to slavery and death. See fear and uncertainty concerning the present have a way making us romanticize the past. Nostalgia can be a dangerous thing. It literally means "a longing for home." Tragically, however, we often prefer a terrible past to an uncertain future. In Hebrew, Egypt is "Mitsrayim," and for a South Carolina boy like me, that sounds a lot like "misery." We would rather retreat into what is comfortable and known—no matter how painful—than fight for a brighter future. That's why God's punishment is so severe on this generation of Israelites. In their rebellion, they have rejected the covenant God made with Abraham. The covenant promise was that God would make them a people and give them a land; in rejecting the land, they have rejected God. They listened to their fears, and their fear led them astray.

But there is an alternative. It's not easy; it can be downright scary. It's kinda like this (show picture).

This was the obstacle I hated the most. It's called the "dirty name"...no it really is. And you can probably guess why. Because you have to run and jump from log to log. And if you hesitate, if you second guess, if you only make a half-hearted attempt, you'll just end up flat on your back. You've got to throw yourself at it.

That's what Caleb and Joshua did. 40 years later after the generation of doubters had died off. They entered the Promised Land, and with God's help, they conquered it. The obstacles were still there. The cities were even stronger than before. But they saw beyond the obstacles. They held on to God's promises, and they saw the opportunity.

Henry Ford nailed it when he said, "whether you think you can or whether you think you can't, you are right." Perception becomes reality.

To God be the glory, Amen and Amen.