

“THE GRASSHOPPER SYNDROME”

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Numbers 13: Selected verses

Matthew 8:23-27

The story of the exploration of Canaan and the Promised Land:

1 *The LORD said to Moses, 2 "Send some men to explore the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the Israelites. From each ancestral tribe send one of its leaders."*

3*So at the Lord's command Moses sent them out from the Desert of Paran. 21*So they went up and explored the land from the Desert of Zin as far as Rehob, toward Lebo Hamath. 22*They went up through the Negev and came to Hebron, where Ahiman, Sheshai and Talmai, the descendants of Anak, lived. 23 . . . Two of them carried it on a pole between them, along with some pomegranates and figs. . 25 At the end of forty days they returned from exploring the land. 26 They came back to Moses and Aaron and the whole Israelite community at Kadesh in the Desert of Paran. There they reported to them and to the whole assembly and showed them the fruit of the land. 27 They gave Moses this account: "We went into the land to which you sent us, and it does flow with milk and honey! Here is its fruit. 28 But the people who live there are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large. We even saw descendants of Anak there. 29 The Amalekites live in the Negev; the Hittites, Jebusites and Amorites live in the hill country; and the Canaanites live near the sea and along the Jordan."*

30 *Then Caleb silenced the people before Moses and said, "We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it."*

31 *But the men who had gone up with him said, "We can't attack those people; they are stronger than we are." 32 And they spread among the Israelites a bad report about the land they had explored. They said, "The land we explored devours those living in it. All the people we saw there are of great size. 33 We saw the Nephilim there (the descendants of Anak come from the Nephilim). **We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them.**"*

Now I'm going to read, just as a little reminder of the power of God, Matthew, Chapter 8:

23 *Then he got into the boat and his disciples followed him. 24 Without warning, a furious storm came up on the lake, so that the waves swept over the boat. But Jesus was sleeping. 25 The disciples went and woke him, saying, "Lord, save us! We're going to drown!"*

26 *He replied, "You of little faith, why are you so afraid?" Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm.*

27 *The men were amazed and asked, "What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!"*

This morning as I watched the delayed broadcast of the service from First Baptist Church in Charlotte, I noticed that great minds run in similar channels. The associate pastor there last Sunday had preached on this very text. I don't know what the title of his sermon was because I didn't see the very beginning of the service, but I had often wondered how long it took — if I ever

knew, I had forgotten — how long it took the Children of Israel to make the trip from Egypt to the edge of the Promised Land. It took them a year and five months to travel that distance. And I never had really ever thought about it, the fact that their forty years of wandering took place just before they were to enter the Promised Land. That is significant. They had finally come to this Promised Land. They were encamped in the Desert of Paran, in the southern most region of it, just at the edge of it. They were soon to have opportunity of possessing the land that God had led them to find — the land of their ancestors.

The use of spies was a common practice in the ancient Near East. Moses had followed this practice by sending one of each of the twelve tribes to bring back a comprehensive report on the land and its produce and its people and its towns.

The footnotes of one of my Bibles indicates that they traveled from the southernmost part, as is indicated in the text, the Desert of Zin, to the northern most post of the land. This was a journey of about two-hundred and fifty miles that took them about forty days.

As the spies came to Hebron, they were amazed at the size and fortification of that city that had been associated with the lives of their ancestors four centuries before. Hebron originally had been a trading place for tradesmen and herdsman. It was here at Hebron that Abram had built an altar to the Lord. Note is made that the spies discovered the descendents of Anak at Hebron. These were men of great stature, of great physical size, who brought great fear to the people. When the spies returned to Moses and Aaron and the whole Israelite company, they showed the fruit of the land they had brought and they began their report.

“Well, we’ve got good news and we’ve got bad news. The good news is that the land does indeed flow with milk and honey. Just look at this cluster of grapes we have here, how large they are and how plentiful the grapes are. But the people who live there are powerful and the cities are well fortified and very large. We even saw the descendents of Anak there. And we were like grasshoppers in our own sight and we seemed the same to them.”

The good news of the report was more than offset by the bad news. Caleb and Joshua were the only two of the twelve who had any positive reaction to the trip. “We should go and possess the land,” they said, “for we can certainly do it.” The others began to cry out about the people being stronger and larger and more powerful. “They are giants, if you please, and we just can’t go up against giants.”

Chapter 14 begins with their great complaint against the Lord. “Why,” they cried, “is the Lord bringing us this far only to let us fall by the sword? Wouldn’t it be better if we could go back to Egypt? We should choose a leader to take us back to Egypt.”

It must have been very discouraging for Moses and Aaron to watch the Israelites milling about grumbling because they were going to have to put forth a little effort to obtain the prize. Joshua and Caleb were the only two out of the whole group who had any confidence in God’s promises. In their frustration, they tore their clothes and said, “The land we passed through and explored is exceedingly good. If the Lord is pleased with us, He will lead us into that land, a land flowing with milk and honey, and give it to us. Only, do not rebel against the Lord. And do

not be afraid of the people of the land, because we will swallow them up. Their protection is gone but the Lord is with us. Do not be afraid of them.”

The story continues that they talked about stoning Caleb and Joshua. Isn't it a paradox of sorts? Caleb and Joshua had just reminded the people that the Lord was with them, that he had brought them to it and He would lead them into the Land, and he would help them to take possession of it? There were no walls, no fortifications, no factors of size or bearing, and certainly no gods that could withstand the onslaught of God's people when the Lord was with them! Caleb and Joshua, I guess, had not told them what they wanted to hear.

You see, freedom extracts a great price as military burial grounds in Flanders Field and Arlington and other military cemeteries across the world will bear mute testimony. Freedom also carries with it great responsibility. These Israelites had groaned in their captivity in Egypt. They had cried out to God and He had heard their cries. He took notice of their plight and He orchestrated miracle after miracle after miracle, the greatest miracles they had seen up to that point in time. His prevenient grace was at work in the call of Moses. You know Moses' story. How he could have died at the sword of Pharaoh but for his mother, who sent him out in a little ark so that he just happened to be found by Pharaoh's daughter, and so on the story goes. And the miracles His great powers He showed forth and the miracles before Pharaoh and the Passover Supper that He gave where He said you spread the blood over the doorpost and down the sides so that when the Death Angel comes across he will *Passover* you. That would mark the beginning of their exodus, and they would celebrate that Passover from then on.

As they walked out to freedom, God had miraculously delivered them from the pursuit of Pharaoh's army at the Red Sea. God had provided water for them at Marah despite their grumbling. God blessed them in spite of themselves and they kept on complaining. They had what I call the “if only” complex of the Grasshopper Syndrome. “If only we had died in Egypt. We had plenty of food there.”

Moses reminded them that it was the Lord who had provided sustenance for them because He had heard their complaining. But he said, “Who are we? You are not grumbling against us but against the Lord.”

The Promised Land was a good and gracious gift from God but it would not be possessed without some effort. The words of the bad reporters became exaggerated and distorted. The Anakites were now said to be the Nephilim, a reference designed to evoke fear — the exaggeration of the faithless that led to their final folly. “We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes and we looked the same to them.”

The Next chapter begins: *All the people . . . Raised their voices and wept.*

They were on the verge of entering the land that had been promised to their ancestor Abraham, the covenant promise God made to him and to his numberless descendants included those people who were doing the grumbling and complaining! But they grumbled and complained that they wanted to go back to their old ways. And then a strange thing happened. But not really so strange, given the fact that God had assured the Israelites of His presence time and again with that cloudy pillar in the day time and that fiery pillar at night.

The glory of the Lord appeared in the Tent of Meeting of all the Israelites, and God said to Moses: “How long are these people going to treat me with contempt?”

The Israelites refusal to believe in the Lord’s power, especially in view of all the wonders they had experienced all along their journey, was contemptible behavior and God said so. Moses appealed to God’s mercy and asked Him to forgive the Israelite's rebellion once more, so God extended His mercy once more. Nevertheless, He says, “Not one of those who saw my glory and the miraculous signs I performed in Egypt and in the desert but disobeyed me ten times, not one of them will see the land I promised their forefathers. Not one who treated me with contempt will ever see it.”

Only Caleb and Joshua were allowed to cross over, they and the children the Israelites had said would die in the desert. Not even Moses and Aaron were allowed to cross over because of their rebellious acts at Meribah. All of this happened because of the Israelite’s Grasshopper Syndrome. “We seemed as grasshoppers in our own eyes and so we looked the same to them.”

They forgot that God had had kept His promises up to this point. They just didn’t believe that He would keep His promises, I guess.

What do we learn from all this? What do we carry out from here today that is going to help us fight our giants? Well, one thing we learn is that Obedience is the first rule for following Him. Obedience to His commandments, obedience to His will and His ways. How much better it would have been for the Children of Israel if they had obeyed God all the time and not just when it was convenient. How much sooner they would have arrived at the Promised Land and how much quicker they could have possessed the land if they had just trusted God and believed that He would keep His promises!

Another thing we can learn from this is that the Israelites needed to remember something we need to remember: that God is sovereign. He was just as much in control of those fearsome inhabitants of Canaan as He was of Pharaoh’s army at the Red Sea and we know what happened to Pharaoh’s army at the Red Sea!

Another thing we learn from this is that the walk of faith is never easy. The Israelites had not come to this point in their quest on a flowery bed of ease. But they had come this far by faith in a God who was able to do exceedingly, abundantly, above all they could ask or think. They failed to realize that if God had brought them this far, He was going to take them the rest of the way.

What they also failed to realize is that even giants can be intimidated by such a small thing as a grasshopper. You remember that it only took one small stone to kill Goliath. (1 Samuel 17) Goliath had been taunting the Israelites and nobody had the courage to go up against him until David said:

Let me go. I’ve fought lions and bears and the same God who delivered me from the lions and bears will deliver me from this Philistine.

And Saul said, "But you're not able to go out against him; you're just a boy."

And David said:

The Lord who delivered me from the paw of lion, the paw of bear will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine.

And Saul wanted him to take his armor and David said, "No, I can't wear that; it's too cumbersome." So the Philistine with his shield bearer came roaring out. He kept coming closer to David and he looked at David and he said, "Am I a dog that you should come to me with sticks? Come here and I will give your flesh to the birds of the air and the beasts of the field."

But listen to what David said:

You come against me with sword and spear and javelin. But I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel whom you have defied. This day the Lord will hand you over to me and I will strike you down and cut off your head. Today I will give the carcasses of the Philistine army to the birds of the air and the beasts of the Earth, and the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel. All those gathered here will know that it is not by sword or spear that the Lord saves for the battle is the Lord's and He will get all of you into our hands.

And so the giant moved closer and David moved closer to the battle line and reached in his bag and took out his slingshot and his stone, and for the want of one smooth stone, Goliath fell in a dead heap. And David triumphed over the Philistine with a sling and a stone. Without a sword in his hand, he struck down the Philistine and killed him.

The man that preached on this text this morning talked about the way the Israelite spies were looking horizontally; they were looking all around them at the things that would hinder them. He said Caleb and Joshua had a *vertical* vision. Just like Peter when he tried to walk on the water. He got out of the boat and he started to walk on the water, and as long as he kept his eyes on Jesus, everything was OK. But when he began to pay attention to the waves lapping up around his feet, he got scared. He said, "Master, save me." And Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and they got in the boat, and He said, "Why were you so afraid?"

So what are we going to do today and tomorrow and the next day? Are we going to sit and complain and wring our hands and miss the blessings God has for us in doing ministry, in doing the Gospel? Or are we going to trust God and go out and kill "giants"?

Amen, Hallelujah, thank you, Jesus, that You have indeed gone before us to prepare the way and that You will be with us as we walk that way, to give us courage and strength to stand up to the giants that hinder us. Help us, Lord, for we do indeed trust in YOU. Help us to trust and obey. In Jesus' name, Amen.