



The Land

GOD REQUIRES OBEDIENT FAITH IN THE FACE OF FEAR.

NUMBERS 13:17-31

Have you ever noticed how a project grows? You decide to clean out the backyard shed, the garage, or the closet. You are going to put down new liner paper in the kitchen cabinets. You are going to paint the kids’ bedroom. You figure out how long it will take and can visualize what it will look like when you’re finished. You begin—excited. But about halfway through, you say, “What was I thinking? This is a lot more complicated than I thought it would be.”

📍 **What was the last project you had that was more complicated than you thought it would be? How did you handle it?**

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

NUMBERS 13:1-33

Moses led God’s people out of Egyptian bondage. They passed through the Red Sea and arrived at the southern tip of the Sinai Peninsula at Mount Sinai. They stayed there for about a year while Moses met with God on the mountain. Afterward, they traveled up the eastern side of the Sinai Peninsula. To their right was the body of water known today as the Gulf of Aqaba. It separates the peninsula from Saudi Arabia. They came to the northern end of the Gulf of Aqaba and continued northward through the Wilderness of Paran. In this context, “wilderness” means a vast desert land that is uninhabitable due to a lack of water and resources. The Israelites’ trek continued to Kadesh (also called “Kadesh-barnea”). This oasis was between the Wilderness of Paran and the Wilderness of Zin. Moses and the Israelites remained in Kadesh while the spies went into Canaan, the land God promised to Abraham.

The climate and resources of Canaan were dramatically different from what the people had experienced before. A huge issue was water. Egypt had a major river system that fed canals and irrigation fields, making food production possible. Not so with Canaan. The Canaanites depended on rainy periods to provide growing seasons for crops. The promised land had (and still has) essentially two seasons. Winter is cool and rainy. Summer, which lasts from mid-May to mid-October, is hot and receives no rain. The “early rains” break the annual drought and allow the farmers to work the fields and plant crops. The rain continues. About seventy percent of the annual rain falls from December to February. The “latter rains” come in March and April. In late summer the wheat and barley would have already been harvested. Workers would be harvesting grapes, figs, and almonds; olives would be visible on the trees but not yet ready for gathering.

📍 **As you read Numbers 13:17-31, notice the two contrasting reports of the spies when they returned. What do you think made the difference in the way they viewed the situation?**

EXPLORE THE TEXT

THE TASK OUTLINED (NUM. 13:17-20)

¹⁷ When Moses sent them to scout out the land of Canaan, he told them, “Go up this way to the Negev, then go up into the hill country. ¹⁸ See what the land is like, and whether the people who live there are strong or weak, few or many. ¹⁹ Is the land they live in good or bad? Are the cities they live in encampments or fortifications? ²⁰ Is the land fertile or unproductive? Are there trees in it or not? Be courageous. Bring back some fruit from the land.” It was the season for the first ripe grapes.

VERSES 17-20

Moses explained that the spies were to travel north from the wilderness of Paran. They would come to the southern edge of the Negev Desert. The root word of *Negev* means “to be dry,” but the basic meaning is “south.” They were to continue northward into Canaan. This was the land God promised Abraham (Gen. 17:8). The *hill country* was a central spine that ran north and south through modern-day Israel, Lebanon, and Syria.

Moses revealed his two primary concerns: the land and the people. What was the land like typographically? What challenges would the people face? He would ask more specific questions about the land in the following verses.


Concerning the people, Moses wanted to know how densely the land was populated and how the people looked militarily—were they *strong or weak*? He wanted to know if the inhabitants were capable of defending their cities and homes. Regarding the Canaanites’ defense capabilities, Moses wanted to know how many people the Israelites would face. Were they *few or many*?

Moses continued his questions, using the same pattern: inquiring about the land first and people second. He asked if the land was *good or bad*. This may seem like an odd detail to include. Certainly, Moses knew the land was good. God told him at the burning bush, “I have come down to rescue them from the power of the Egyptians and to bring them from that land to a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey” (Ex. 3:8). Did asking for this detail show a lack of faith on Moses’s part? Was he asking if God could be trusted to keep His word? No, the exact opposite. This detail would prove that God had fulfilled His promise.

Next, Moses asked about cities. Were they fortified, meaning walled? The answer would make a difference in what the Israelite military would face.

Moses continued, asking first about the land—was it *fertile or unproductive*? For months, the people had survived on the water and manna God provided. The Israelites had protested the monotony of their diet (Num. 11:4-6). If the land were fertile, it would supply enough food to support the Israelite military and their families. That would mean a variety of foods and no more manna! The *trees* Moses mentioned would have been fruit-bearing. Bringing back fruit would prove what the land was like, whether it was fertile or not.

The instruction to *be courageous* can also mean “be determined.” This meant the spies had to be single-minded and tenacious about their task. Courage would be essential—especially if the Canaanites were strong and their cities were fortified.

 **What do you imagine the spies were thinking while Moses explained the information he wanted them to bring back? What would have caused them to be afraid?**

 **How do you typically approach a God-given task? What concerns or apprehensions arise?**

KEY DOCTRINE: *God the Father*

God is all powerful, all knowing, all loving, and all wise. (See 2 Timothy 1:7; 2 Peter 1:3.)

THE LAND ASSESSED (NUM. 13:21-25)

²¹ So they went up and scouted out the land from the Wilderness of Zin as far as Rehob near the entrance to Hamath.

²² They went up through the Negev and came to Hebron, where Ahiman, Sheshai, and Talmi, the descendants of Anak, were

living. Hebron was built seven years before Zoan in Egypt.²³ When they came to Eshcol Valley, they cut down a branch with a single cluster of grapes, which was carried on a pole by two men. They also took some pomegranates and figs.²⁴ That place was called Eshcol Valley because of the cluster of grapes the Israelites cut there.²⁵ At the end of forty days they returned from scouting out the land.

VERSES 21-22

The word *so* links the instructions above with the actions described next. They *went up* and *scouted out*, exactly as Moses had told them to do (v. 17, also v. 2).

The *Wilderness of Zin* was on the northeastern part of the Sinai Peninsula and southeast of Beer-sheba. It was the southern boundary for Canaan. Receiving less than two inches of rain annually, the Wilderness of Zin was uninhabitable and impossible to cultivate agriculturally.

The northernmost region the spies scouted out was at the *entrance to Hamath*. This was near the headwaters of the Orontes River, which flows northward into the Mediterranean. These headwaters begin northeast of today's Beirut, Lebanon. This valley region was known as *Rehob*, not to be confused with a Galilean city that had the same name; it will be discussed below.

The *Negev* is the southern edge of Canaan. This desert region receives eight to twelve inches of rain annually, significantly more than the Wilderness of Zin. The Negev's powdery soil does not absorb water well; instead, it runs off. This hinders any agricultural efforts in the region.

After Abram (later called "Abraham") separated from his nephew Lot, God promised him the land as far as he could see. Abram then moved to *Hebron* and built an altar there to God (Gen. 13:14-18). This was the first time Scripture mentions this location.

Zoan was the capital city of some pharaohs in Egypt's 15th dynasty. Being older than the fortified city of Zoan helped bolster Hebron's reputation. David's first capital city was Hebron, and he was anointed there (2 Sam. 2:1-4,11).

VERSES 23-25

The Hebrew word *Eshcol* means "cluster." The Hebrew word translated *Valley* refers to a wadi, a stream bed or ravine that is dry except during rainy seasons. The spies named the site because

of the grapes they cut there. Its exact location is unclear, yet it was evidently near Hebron. To this day, the region has excellent soil for growing grapes.

Many have wondered if the description of a cluster being carried on a pole was an exaggeration. Strabo, a Greek geographer and historian who lived about 63 BC to AD 24, described grape clusters harvested in Antioch that were two cubits, or about thirty-six inches long. The impressive fruit provided proof of the region's abundant food resources. It was dramatically different from the foods the Israelites had in Egypt: "cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic" (Num. 11:5). The spies' haul fulfilled Moses's final instructions: "Bring back some fruit from the land" (13:20).

Verses 21 and 25 show that the spies followed the instructions God had given through Moses (see vv. 2,17a). How far had the spies traveled? From the Wilderness of Zin northward to Rehob was about 250 miles one way. This would have required the spies to walk about twelve to thirteen miles daily.



How do we balance acting in faith and gathering information before acting?

THE DECISION AT HAND (NUM. 13:26-31)

²⁶ The men went back to Moses, Aaron, and the entire Israelite community in the Wilderness of Paran at Kadesh. They brought back a report for them and the whole community, and they showed them the fruit of the land.²⁷ They reported to Moses, "We went into the land where you sent us. Indeed it is flowing with milk and honey, and here is some of its fruit."²⁸ However, the people living in the land are strong, and the cities are large and fortified. We also saw the descendants of Anak there.²⁹ The Amalekites are living in the land of the Negev; the Hethites, Jebusites, and Amorites live in the hill country; and the Canaanites live by the sea and along the Jordan."³⁰ Then Caleb quieted the people in the presence of Moses and said, "Let's go up now and take possession of the land because we can certainly conquer it!"³¹ But the men who had gone up with him responded, "We can't attack the people because they are stronger than we are!"

VERSES 26-29

Initially, the spies’ report focused on the land and how agriculturally productive it was. The spies brought **some** of the fruit; this was a representative sample, but not all that the land could produce. The phrase **milk and honey** highlights the rich resources of Canaan. God used this phrase at the burning bush to describe the abundance of the land (Ex. 3:17).

Numbers doesn’t include the spies reporting that the land was “good.” However, it was part of their report. Deuteronomy 1:25 says the spies “brought us back a report: ‘The land the LORD our God is giving us is good.’” The Hebrew word for “good” is the same one God used to describe His creation in Genesis.

Having described the goodness of the land, the spies focused next on their concerns. The word **however** stands like a massive barrier in the flow of the story. The Hebrew text’s word order emphasizes the spies’ apprehension. It reads, “strong are the people who inhabit the land.” The Hebrew word translated **strong** can also mean the people were harsh and fierce.

Excavations have shown that some Canaanite cities were **fortified** and virtually impregnable, having fifteen-foot-thick walls that stood thirty to fifty feet high.

The **descendants of Anak** were known for their height. The spies reported that they (the spies) were “like grasshoppers” in their sight (Num. 13:33). A generation later, Joshua ran the Anakims out. They relocated to Philistine territory, including Gath, which, centuries later, was Goliath’s hometown (Josh. 11:21-22; 1 Sam. 17:4).

Amalekites were nomads who lived in the northeast Sinai Peninsula; they had a reputation for using brutal battle tactics. They seemed to be in perpetual conflict with the Israelites. This eventually led to their destruction (Ex. 17:8-16; 1 Sam. 15:1-9).

The **Amorites** were a semi-nomadic people. Ancient Egyptian texts say they inhabited the region from the Negev northward to the hill regions of what is today Lebanon. The ancestral roots of the **Hethites** went back to Noah’s great, great grandson (Gen. 10:15). In time, they came to be called the Hittites. The **Jebusites** were the original inhabitants of Jebus, which came to be called “Jerusalem.” The **Canaanites** lived in the fertile lowlands.

VERSES 30-31

Caleb, one of the twelve spies, **quieted** the people. The Hebrew word here is typically an interjection and sounds much like the English word, “Hush!” The people were upset by the spies’ report.


Despite the troubling report, Caleb was ready to **go up now and take possession**. His words ring with confidence. He was not denying the challenge ahead. He had seen the same cities, fortifications, and people the other spies had seen. Rather than be intimidated by what he had seen, Caleb was ready to conquer the land and overcome its inhabitants.

They failed to see the challenge through God’s eyes and His strength.

Verse 31 highlights the contrast between faith and fear. The other spies (except Joshua) vehemently disagreed with Caleb (Num. 14:5-9). Their declaration was the opposite of his. Caleb said “we can.” They said **we can’t**.

When the time came for a decision, the ten spies could focus only on their fears, weaknesses, and inadequacies. They failed to see the challenge through God’s eyes and His strength. As we will see in next week’s study, fear won—at least for now.

 **What kind of obstacles might prevent or delay us from obeying God?**

 **BIBLE SKILL:** Use multiple Scripture passages to better understand a Bible passage.

Review Numbers 13:27-31. Where does the unbelief show itself? Read Joshua 21:43-45 and 2 Corinthians 1:20. What do these verses reveal about God and His faithfulness to His promises? How should these verses guide us when we face challenging circumstances?

APPLY THE TEXT

- + Believers can depend on God to instruct them in the tasks He has for them.
- + Obedience to God includes what He is calling us to do.
- + Believers can face obstacles with faith, knowing God is with them.



What new ministry opportunity has the Lord put in front of your Bible study group? What actions (if any) have you taken to begin? What steps can you take to start implementing this ministry opportunity?



What act of obedience have you been delaying because you thought it would become too difficult? What steps do you need to take to move you closer to beginning that undertaking? What will you do this week to move you forward?

Memorize Numbers 13:30.

Prayer Needs