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Session 2 - Rejecting God's gift

Bible Passages

Numbers 13:1-14:45

Brief Notes

It would be too much to read both chapters during the study, so I would encourage people to read it before they come. The bare outline of what happens people will probably be familiar with, so you might ask them to note what strikes them as they read the actual account.

Chapter 13 : The Report

The scouts' mission is not to do a feasibility study to determine if an attack might succeed, for God reminds them that this is the land "which I am giving to the Israelites" (v.1). They are reminded of God's promise. The spies are being sent out simply to "explore the land", that what they find might encourage them and to help them plan. When they return they report that the land is indeed fertile and bountiful— flowing with milk and honey (v.27) – but ... the size of the opposition impressed them more than the size of the grapes. For Caleb, more impressive still was God's promise (v.30), but the other spies give no weight to that and see only their own weakness and the strength of the opposition. They spread a "bad report", exaggerating the dangers and passing on

their fear to the people - a people which less than a fortnight ago had left Sinai full of faith and confidence.

Chapter 14 : The Response

The People's Response and the Appeal of Caleb and Joshua (vv.1-10a)

God had chosen a leader for them to bring them out of Egypt into his promised land, but now they reject that leader and treat the promise with contempt. They reckon God's purpose is malign, and would rather choose a new leader to lead them back to Egypt (vv.1-4). Caleb and Joshua make an impassioned appeal, reminding them of God's goodness and strength. Instead of fearing the Canaanites, they should rather fear God and not rebel against him (vv.5-9). But the people will have none of it and threaten to stone them (v.10a)

God's Response and the Appeal of Moses (vv.10b-38)

Whatever fear an Anakite might instil must have been as nothing to the manifestation of the glory of the LORD. In rejecting the promise of God, the people are rejecting the God of the promise (treating him "with contempt"). Their lack of faith was not for lack of evidence, but in the face of abundant evidence (v.11). As he had done after the golden calf incident in Ex.32, God threatens to destroy them and start afresh with Moses, but in saying that he is inviting Moses to intercede for them. Moses is not trying to make God do what he doesn't want to do, but rather he is the means God uses to accomplish his will (notice how readily God replies in v.20). Moses appeals to God's reputation (vv.13-16) and to God's character (vv.17-19). The LORD does forgive and yet there will be discipline and consequences they must face. Those who had spoken foolishly of their wish to die in the wilderness (v.2), will indeed die – an entire generation (Caleb and Joshua excepted), beginning with the 10 spies who are struck down then and there.

Epilogue (vv.39-45)

The people's lack of faith in not going up into the land when the LORD had given it to them, is now followed by a lack of obedience as they try to go up and take the land when the LORD has made it clear they are not. They acknowledge and mourn their sin, but there is no repentance towards God.

These chapters expose the people's faithlessness, whilst giving in contrast some great examples of true faith; but even more the chapters seem to show us God's heart: his faithfulness and goodness, his holiness and justice, his concern for his own glory, his strength seen especially in covenant love. Moses' prayer helps us understand the tension within the heart of God, whilst also reminding us of our need of an intercessor, perfectly met in Christ.

The writer of Hebrews applies this story to us today in Heb.3-4. There may not be time for cross references, but you might consider Heb.4:11 and what kind of “effort” is required of us.

Discussion Questions

- What was the purpose of the scouting mission?
 - What did they find?
- There’s a majority report and a minority report. What factors weighed most heavily for each?
- How did the people respond?
 - Why do you think Moses and Aaron “fell face down in front of” them (v.5)?
 - How did Joshua and Caleb appeal to the people?
- What was God’s response?
 - When had God made a similar response to this before?
 - Is Moses acting here like someone trying to restrain an angry friend from punching someone’s light’s out? Or how does Moses help us understand more God’s heart?
- To what does Moses appeal in vv13-16?
- To what does Moses appeal in vv.17-19?
- If God forgives, why are there still consequences?
 - How are the consequences fitting?
- The people mourned their sin, but how is it clear the following day that there is no repentance?
- This story obviously is a notable example of the faithlessness of God’s people, but what examples of faith are there which we might learn from too?
- What did the people then (and what should we today) learn about God from this episode?
 - Is that a corrective to how we sometimes think about him?
- When the writer of Hebrews applied this story to his hearers, he concludes “Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will perish by following their example of disobedience” (Heb.4:11). What sort effort is needed?
- Who intercedes for us today in the way Moses did for the people then?

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