

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

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Sermon manuscript

**Sermon Series:** Lessons Learned in the Wilderness  
(Studies in Exodus and Numbers)

### **The High Price of “NO!”**

(Numbers 13-14)

Study #3

#### **Introduction:** Pictures that tell a story...

If you are a Dallas Cowboys fan (or NFL history buff), a certain image will come to your mind when I say “Green Bay Ice Bowl”.<sup>1</sup>

You will think of the 1967 NFL Championship Game played against Vince Lombardi’s Green Bay Packers. The temperature during the game was 31 degrees below zero and Green Bay won, 21-17 in the final seconds on a quarterback sneak by Bart Starr.

Being a Dallas native, “Dealey Plaza” conjures an image for me, as that was the site of President John F. Kennedy’s assassination.

When any of us hear “World Trade Center” we don’t think of two New York skyscrapers. We think of a history-defining moment of destruction on 9/11, 2001, when two hijacked Boeing 767s were flown into the Twin Towers.

Some named places are so closely tied to historical events that we can’t think of the place without thinking of the event. That’s true of secular history and it’s true of biblical history.

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<sup>1</sup> I grew up in Dallas, so I was a Cowboys fan from birth. I haven’t been a fan since the late 90’s, when the ‘Boys last had much of a winning campaign. But I am again, now - so, yes, I am the consummate fair-weather fan.

When we hear “Red Sea” we don’t think of wetness, but the dryness of the Exodus. We remember “Bethlehem” because it is the birthplace of Jesus; “Golgotha” because it was the site of His death.

Today, I’m going to add a place name to a list of place names that will, from today forward, in your mind be joined to an event.

The event that occurred at Kadesh-barnea (or, simply, Kadesh) was so important for God’s people that it should rank right up there with The Garden of Eden, the Tower of Babel, and Mount Sinai.

For centuries after the event that occurred at Kadesh, the mere mention of “Kadesh” brought a whole rush of painful emotions - sadness and grief and bitter regret - to the Jews.

And our time this morning seeing this event is not just a history lesson about what happened a long time ago. It is a very clear warning to beware our own 21<sup>st</sup> century Kadesh-barneas.

*Review and preview...*

In the book of Exodus, we read of the Jews’ *exodus* from Egypt and of their *entrance* into the wilderness. Today, we should read in the book of Numbers of their *exodus* from the wilderness and their *entrance* into the Promised Land.

But we don’t.

And the reason we don’t - and the reason they didn’t enter that Promised Land - is because of the watershed event that happened at Kadesh.

The people of Israel had survived the journey across the desert from Mount Sinai to the oasis of Kadesh. They set up camp at Kadesh, fifty miles away from the Promised Land, and there, the Lord spoke to Moses.

#### **A Mission from God: Very Possible. (vv. 1-20)**

#### **God’s Spy Force (vv. 1-2)**

**[2] “Send out for yourself men so that they may spy out the land of Canaan, which I am going to give to the sons of Israel; you shall send a man from each of their fathers’ tribes<sup>2</sup>, every one a leader among them.”**

You’ll note here the purpose for the spy mission. These men weren’t sent out to decide if they should take the land. THAT was not up for discussion. The land was to be theirs. Their mission was reconnaissance.

### **The Mission of the Spies (vv. 17-20)**

*Enter Canaan and check out the PEOPLE. (vv. 17-18)*

**[17] When Moses sent them to spy out the land of Canaan, he said to them, “Go up there into the Negev<sup>3</sup>; then go up into the hill country.”**

They were to travel north from Kadesh into the region of southern Canaan (the Negev). From there, they were to continue going north into the Hill Country.

Much like the Hill Country of South Central Texas, the Hill Country of Palestine is a chain of hills that runs through the land, all the way to Galilee in the north.

As they followed this route, the twelve spies were to observe and collect data.

Now, remember, none of the Jews in the days of Moses knew the first thing about Canaan.

Four centuries earlier Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and his clan had all lived there. But not one of the people with Moses had ever even seen it.

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<sup>2</sup> You may have noticed in reading through the list that one of the tribes, Levi, was not mentioned. That omission is not unusual. Frequently, in the listing of the twelve tribes, Levi is omitted. As the priestly tribe, Levi’s descendants belonged to the Lord in a special way. So, another “twelfth tribe” was formed by dividing the one tribe of Joseph into two, made up of Joseph’s sons, Ephraim and Manasseh.

<sup>3</sup> “The Negev” was the generic term given to the southern section of the land of Palestine, a dry area unsuitable for irrigation and agriculture.

Moses told them, **[18] “See what the land is like, and whether the people who live in it are strong or weak, whether they are few or many.”**

They were to make note about the people who lived there and report on those peoples’ military strength and preparedness. They were also to report on the land.<sup>4</sup>

*Enter Canaan and check out the LAND (vv. 19-20)*

**[19] “How is the land in which they live, is it good or bad? And how are the cities in which they live, are they like open camps or with fortifications? [20] How is the land, is it fat or lean? Are there trees in it or not? Make an effort then to get some of the fruit of the land.”**

Moses wanted the twelve spies to put on a “show-off and tell” time for all the Jews back at camp when they returned so that everybody would be excited about the good land God was giving them.

Again, notice. The spies’ trip was not to find out if the land was worth fighting for. It was to convince them that the land was worth fighting for.

So, the spies left friends and loved ones, left the safety of the wilderness encampment guarded by the pillar of cloud and fire, left Kadesh-barnea, and set out to explore the land of promise.

### **Recon Israelites Spy Out the Land (vv. 21-24)**

#### **Tracing Their Journeys (vv. 21-22)**

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<sup>4</sup> They were obviously planning on destroying the cities, so it was important to determine whether those cities were capable of withstanding assault. Were these cities of the type that had high walls around them (like Jericho) or were they defended by vigilant watchmen on the perimeter of the camp?

***[21] So they went up and spied out the land from the wilderness of Zin<sup>1</sup> as far as Rehob, at Lebo-hamath. [22] When they had gone up into the Negev, they came to Hebron where Ahiman, Sheshai and Talmai, the descendants of Anak were. (Now Hebron was built seven years before Zoan in Egypt.)***

Those odd-sounding names are geographic waypoints that tell us that the spies bisected the land of Canaan, south to north - and back.<sup>5</sup>

Mention is made of the descendants of Anak. These guys were noteworthy because of their physical size. They were big. In fact, some hundreds of years later, a young shepherd boy (David) would battle one of the sons of Anak, a Philistine from Gath named Goliath.

As they had been instructed, while they were in Canaan, they sampled the land's goodness and brought some of it back to the camp at Kadesh.

### **Sampling the Good Land's Bounty (vv. 23-24)**

***[23] Then they came to the valley of Eshcol and from there cut down a branch with a single cluster of grapes; and they carried it on a pole between two men, with some of the pomegranates and the figs. [24] That place was called the valley of Eshcol, because of the cluster which the sons of Israel cut down from there.***

So, the spies fulfilled their mandate. They had been sent out to explore the land, and explore it they did.

- They saw the hill country region.
- They saw the Jordan River valley.
- They saw the coast of the Mediterranean.
- They saw the fertile fields of Galilee and the beautiful Sea of Galilee.

Now, we get to listen to the report of the spies concerning the lay of the land and its potential.

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<sup>5</sup> It was near Hebron that God promised the land of Canaan to Abraham, five hundred years earlier (Gen. 13:14-18). Abraham also set out to defeat the kings who had kidnapped Lot from Hebron and he bought property to bury his wife, Sarah, at Hebron.

### **A Difference of Opinion: A Crisis of Faith (vv. 25-33)**

#### **The Spies' Mixed Report (vv. 25-29)**

*The land is fine... (vv. 25-27)*

***[25] When they returned from spying out the land, at the end of forty days, [26] they proceeded to come to Moses and Aaron and to all the congregation of the sons of Israel in the wilderness of Paran, at Kadesh; and they brought back word to them and to all the congregation and showed them the fruit of the land. [27] Thus they told him, and said, "We went in to the land where you sent us; and it certainly does flow with milk and honey, and this is its fruit."***

This is a glowing report. Canaan was a good land. But, if you listen to their report carefully, you'll hear them referring to the Promised Land in a somewhat detached way.

Almost without exception, when Canaan has been mentioned up to this point, it is referred to as ***"the land which the Lord swore to give to us."*** Now, it is ***"the land where YOU (i.e. - Moses) sent us."***

I find that interesting...

It causes me to wonder if they were more focused on Moses' commission than on God's gracious gift. That wondering is confirmed as we turn to the next part of the spies' report.

*...but, there are challenges. (vv. 28-29)*

***[28] "Nevertheless, the people who live in the land are strong, and the cities are fortified and very large..."***

So, the cities are an obstacle. And so are the some of the tribes that inhabit the land.

- There are the very big sons of Anak.

- There are the Hittites, a very advanced and militarily strong civilization.<sup>6</sup>
- The Amalekites were there, too - a warlike Bedouin people, living on the southern borders of Canaan and in the Sinai Peninsula.
- And there are also the Jebusites, the Amorites, and the Canaanites, all known for their violence and cruelty and idolatry.

We can feel the spies' terror and the people's growing panic. The message behind the message of the good land is - *"No way can we take this land."* And the Jews camped at Kadesh were convinced by this eye-witness report of the folly of even trying to take the land.

There was one of the spies, though, who took exception to the majority report. Caleb, the representative from the tribe of Judah, had a very different perspective.

### **The Voice of Faith - Let's Go for It! (v. 30)**

The Bible tells us that he first had to quiet the people. The people were making noise. Were they sobbing? wailing? grumbling? Obviously, the majority spy report had left the people agitated and upset.

But Caleb didn't side with the majority. Listen to Caleb.

***[30] "We should by all means go up and take possession of it, for we shall surely overcome it."***

*"Don't listen to the others. This is not Mission: Impossible. With God, it is completely possible. Hard, but possible. We can do this thing. We can take the land."*

And, no. Caleb wasn't looking at the land of Canaan through rose-colored glasses. He saw the difficulties just like the others had. But he saw past the problems to God's promise.

Tragically, though, Caleb's voice was drowned out by others who said that only fools would try to take this land.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Their main stomping grounds were in Asia Minor, to the north of Canaan. But by this time, we know that their influence had extended into Palestine.

### **The Grasshopper Brigade Speaks Out (vv. 31-33)**

***[31] But the men who had gone up with him said, "We are not able to go up against the people, for they are too strong for us." [32] So they gave out to the sons of Israel a bad report of the land which they had spied out, saying, "The land through which we have gone, in spying it out, is a land that devours its inhabitants; and all the people whom we saw in it are men of great size."***

Now, quick. What do you think God thought of their assessment of the land He wanted them to have? I think He heard this:

*"We don't think that the land God picked out for us is such a sweet deal. In fact, God's gift is not good for us."*

That sounds like a grumble - and we already know what God thinks about His people's grumbles. The spies' final words give us a pathetic commentary on the state of their hearts.

***[33] "There also we saw the Nephilim<sup>8</sup> (the sons of Anak are part of the Nephilim); and we became like grasshoppers in our own sight, and so we were in their sight."***

These spies spoke as if they had been sent on this recon mission to determine IF they should take the land or not. But that had not been their assignment. They were the eyes of the mission, not the brains.

What they were doing would be like us here at Northwest holding a congregational vote after church today to decide if we should obey the Great Commission, whether or not to evangelize, serve, give, or pray.

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<sup>7</sup> Someone counted and discovered that the Jews' misbehavior at Kadesh was the tenth time since having left Egypt.

<sup>8</sup> Nephilim - the demi-gods who lived on the earth before the flood (Gen. 6:4) I believe that this was hyperbole, an exaggeration to further make their point that the land wasn't worth fighting for.

We don't make those calls. The Lord has already told us what is our mission. But the spies have decided that they don't have to do what God has commanded because the Canaanites are big.

The defeatist attitude of the spies spread like a wasting disease through the nation.

### **A Final. Tragic Decision (14:1-10)**

#### **A Word from the Grumbling Grasshoppers... (vv. 1-4)**

***[1] Then all the congregation lifted up their voices and cried, and the people wept that night. [2] And all the sons of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron; and the whole congregation said to them, "Would that we had died in the land of Egypt. Or would that we had died in this wilderness. [3] Why is the Lord bringing us into this land, to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become plunder; would it not be better for us to return to Egypt?" [4] So they said to one another, "Let us appoint a leader and return to Egypt."***

In other words, *"Anything will be better than trying to enter Canaan. Anything is better than what God has planned for us. We'd better start looking out for ourselves. We obviously can't trust God."*

Then, *"I've got it. Let's go back to Egypt."*

In previous grumbings and rebellions, they had looked back wistfully at Egypt. This is fundamentally different. Here they actually make plans to return there. They don't want to have anything to do with what God is offering them.

Moses and his God-appointed helper, Aaron, knew that talking this way was to tread on thin ice. It was blasphemous to make plans to return to Egypt.

#### **Men with Courage, Conviction, Vision (vv. 5-9)**

*Moses and Aaron recognize what is going on, and fear. (v. 5)*

#### ***[5] Then Moses and Aaron fell on their faces in the presence of all the assembly of the congregation of the sons of Israel.***

In the Old Testament, you fall on your face when you expect God's judgment. Moses and Aaron fully expected judgment to fall on the people for their rebellious disbelief and disobedience.

But judgment didn't fall. God stayed His hand. He was waiting to see if the people would repent when they heard the next faith-filled words of Caleb and his faithful fellow-spy, Joshua.

*Joshua and Caleb challenge God's people. (vv. 6-9)*

***[6] Joshua<sup>9</sup> the son of Nun and Caleb the son of Jephunneh, of those who had spied out the land, tore their clothes;<sup>10</sup> [7] and they spoke to all the congregation of the sons of Israel, saying, "The land which we passed through to spy out is an exceedingly good land. [8] "If the Lord is pleased with us, then He will bring us into this land, and give it to us - a land which flows with milk and honey. [9] "Only do not rebel against the Lord; and do not fear the people of the land, for they will be our prey. Their protection has been removed from them, and the Lord is with us; do not fear them."***

So, did Joshua and Caleb not notice the giants in the land? Did they not notice the walled cities and the hostile hordes in Canaan?

No, they saw them, just like the other ten spies saw them. But they saw something the other ten missed. They saw the Lord.

And Joshua and Caleb would tell us that when we keep sight of the Lord, no giant will keep us from disobedience.

They gave a powerful speech.

They called their brother spies' response what it was: cowardly rebellion. They affirmed that Canaan was a simply wonderful piece of

<sup>9</sup> The Aramaic name, *Jesus* is equivalent to the Hebrew name, *Joshua*.

<sup>10</sup> Before they said a word, Joshua and Caleb tore their clothes, a signal that they were really, really upset.

property. They urged their fellow-Jews to courage in the face of the giants.

But it landed on a Kadesh crowd with hard hearts, stiff necks, and closed ears.

### **The People Reject the Word of the Lord (v. 10)**

*The people's sin*

**[10a] But all the congregation said to stone them with stones.**

For hundreds of years, the Jews' ancestors had been hearing God's promise of the land of Canaan. Here, they flatly rejected it.

Since they had been in Egypt, this generation had been listening to Moses tell them that the land was theirs for the taking. They rejected Moses' word, too.

Now, they have listened to Joshua and Caleb challenge them to take possession of the good land. They picked up stones to kill them.

Now, God's judgment falls. God's response is not surprising, and it is perfectly severe.

*The judgment of God*

As the remainder of Numbers 14 tells us, God consigned the whole nation of Israel to a generation's worth of wandering around in the wilderness.

They refused His gift of the land. Now, they are prohibited from entering the land.

The spies had been in Canaan for forty days, and the nation would spend one year in the desert for every day of that reconnaissance trip.

They would stay in the wilderness until all of the generation that disbelieved and disobeyed died. Not one of them - except Joshua and Caleb - would enter the land of promise.

That's Kadesh-barnea. What happened there left an indelible impression on the Jews. I wonder what Kadesh-barnea says to us, today, who follow Jesus?

### **Conclusion:**

Well, we really don't have to wonder. That's because in the New Testament letter to the Hebrews,<sup>11</sup> the author makes a long and pointed reference to the events at Kadesh-barnea.<sup>12</sup>

Due to the constraints of time, I'm not, now, going to speak at length from Hebrews.

But I will summarize what the author of Hebrews drives home to his first-century Christian audience because I believe that the lesson he draws from Kadesh-barnea for his readers is exactly what he would want us to learn today.

***[Hebrews 3:15]...TODAY IF YOU HEAR HIS VOICE, DO NOT HARDEN YOUR HEARTS, AS WHEN THEY PROVOKED ME. [16] For who provoked Him when they had heard? Indeed, did not all those who came out of Egypt led by Moses? [17] And with whom was He angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness?***

*For the Jews, eternal life was not at issue*

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<sup>11</sup> Look at Hebrews 3:15--4:11. In addition, this extended passage is drawn from Psalm 95, a psalm written to draw lessons from Numbers 13-14.

<sup>12</sup> Hebrews was written to Jewish believers in Jesus who were being tempted to return to orthodox Judaism and leave the fold of Christianity to avoid persecution. The main thrust of the letter is to encourage these believers to press on in obedience to Christ - no matter what the cost, because of the greatness of what He has done for them. It is easy to see the tie-in with what Israel was being asked to do at Kadesh-barnea, take the land, no matter the cost, because of God's great redemption of them from Egypt.

That generation of God's people who believed the majority rather than Joshua and Caleb *provoked* God. By their provocation, they learned the high price of saying, "NO!" to God.

Forty years of wilderness wanderings and forfeiting the right to enter the Promised Land was a very high price to pay.<sup>13</sup>

However, they never ceased being God's people. He didn't disown them. They were His people throughout those forty years.

After they rebelled, God forgave their sin (Numbers 14:20). He continued to feed them manna. He led them with the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night.

Eternal life wasn't at issue. What was at issue was the enjoyment of and the experience of God's blessings.

*For the Jews, enjoyment of God's blessings was the issue*

Their refusal to trust and obey meant that they never entered into the blessings of living in the beautiful land.

Yes. Had they entered Canaan, they would have had to fight giants. That would have been hard and scary. But God wanted them to weigh the blessings He had in store for them as so valuable that it was worth risking everything to gain.<sup>14</sup>

But, they didn't. They failed to trust God and they didn't enter.

When it comes to how you and I should apply the lessons Israel was to have learned, I would make three concluding comments.

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<sup>13</sup> Not even Moses entered the Promised Land. Read the story in Numbers 20 where he struck the rock with his staff to bring forth water (as he did earlier; Exodus 17 at Rephidim). This time, though, God had told him to speak to the rock. For striking it, God denied Moses entrance into Canaan.

<sup>14</sup> Their desire to return to Egypt highlighted that they cared more for the satisfaction of their base appetites than they did to enjoy God's immeasurably greater blessings.

*Today, trusting obedience, not eternal life, is the issue*

FIRST, just as eternal life was not the issue for the Jews, so it is not the issue for us.

We receive eternal life as a free gift of God's grace through faith in the finished work of Christ on the cross for us. We are sinners, guilty before a holy God. There was nothing we could do to rescue ourselves. So, Jesus gave His life that we might live. He paid it all.

"Entering Canaan" is not a picture of going to heaven. It is a picture of entering into all of the blessings God has for us now that we are His children.

The language of entering Canaan speaks of experiencing the abundant, joyful, meaningful life Jesus died for us to enjoy. It is about a growing connection with God.

And, just as it was for Israel, there are giants we'll have to face in the beautiful land of faith and obedience.

When you listen to God's invitation to leave the wilderness of self-will and rebellion, when you decide that you will enter into the blessed life He has for you, expect to fight giants.<sup>15</sup>

Nobody ever said that pressing the Gospel into our world would be easy. There might be opposition. There will certainly be inconvenience.

You might encounter the giants of people who are not easy to love. There is the giant temptation to complain. The giants of apathy and of materialism must be slain. We'll have to fight for purity to fully enter in to the life God wants us to enjoy.

In the beautiful land of God's promise, we don't assume ease and comfort. We don't expect a risk-free life. We'll have to fight giants with all the energy and emotional and physical strength we have.

Israel found giants in the land of rest and we will, too.

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<sup>15</sup> Hebrews calls it God's "*rest*" - Hebrews 3:11, 18; 4:13, 5, 8, 9, 10, 11.

*Today, it is always "Today"*

SECOND, Israel was given a certain "today" to enter the Promised Land. They hardened their hearts on their "today" and lost the opportunity to enter.

We also have been given "today." But, as I read Hebrews 3 and 4, today, it is always "today." In other words, there is never a time when it is not the perfect time to trust and obey God.

If you obeyed God yesterday, great. Will you trust and obey Him today? You didn't walk with God yesterday? That's a shame. But yesterday's dead and gone. What will you do with today?

The decision to enter God's Promised Land of faith and obedience is a decision we make every day. As much as we might like to make that decision "once and for all", that's not the way life works.

Life is daily. What will you do with today? It is never too late to start doing the right thing. Say "YES!" today.

*Today, we enter God's rest together*

THIRD, and finally, let's all admit that there is a very great and real temptation to not enter into all that God has for us.

An entire generation of God's people failed to enter Canaan. They refused to trust and obey. Lots and lots of Christians through the centuries have failed to "enter", too.

Given the challenge involved with entering, it shouldn't surprise any of us that we will need help. This "trust and obey" thing is no easy assignment.

And it is an assignment that we are much more likely to carry out when we are walking together.

That is why we read in Hebrews, **[3:12] Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God. [13] But encourage one another day**

***after day, as long as it is still called "Today," so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.***

God has provided a tremendous aid for your faith in your friendships with others who are on the same journey.

Whether through involvement with an Adult Bible Fellowship, youth ministry, a Care Group, or regular cups of coffee in Jesus' Name, I urge you to nurture friendships with God in the middle.

Deep, meaningful engagement with friends who are traveling toward faith and obedience is a God-ordained antidote to rebellion, a cure for faithlessness, and a vital part of the prescription for spiritual vitality.