

TRAVELING WITH A HOLY GOD IS TRAVELING BY FAITH Numbers 13:1-14:12

INTRODUCTION

On two occasions I have traveled overseas for short term mission projects. On both occasions I traveled to the other side of the planet in the same way that every traveler makes his journey, by faith. I boldly approached hotel front desks in faith, expecting them to have a room for me because of a promise given to me weeks earlier by a person on the phone when I called to make a reservation. I confidently climbed on board airplanes and trusted them to fly me across the Pacific Ocean. Everyone who travels does so by faith. We trust the promises of travel agents, the people who work at the ticket counter, airplane pilots, what we were taught in physics class, government safety inspectors, mechanics, food preparation people and luggage handlers. It is not only travelers but all humans live by faith all the time as we journey through this life. Everyone always trusts the promises of others and acts upon those promises. An act as simple as driving your car is done by faith; you trust the other drivers to obey the traffic laws, you trust your car to obey your commands and you trust the traffic signs to be telling you the truth about speed limits and curves in the road. Faith is simply the act of depending upon the promise of another. It is trusting that what you are told is true and then living as if it is true.

God made a promise to Abraham that he was going to make him into a great nation and give him the land of Canaan when he was about 100 years old and both he and Sarah were beyond the biological ability to have children and they were living as landless nomads. Abraham believed God's promise and it was on the condition of his faith in that promise that the Lord considered him to be righteous, that is, fit for heaven. As we have followed the story of Abraham and his descendants from Genesis 12 to this present moment in Numbers 13 we have watched how God has faithfully been fulfilling that promise he made to Abraham. God multiplied the descendants of Abraham into a great nation while they lived in Egypt. Then, through Moses he delivered them from their slavery in Egypt and has carried them through the desert to the southern border of the land he has promised to give them. He made all the travel arrangements for getting them from Egypt, through the wilderness and into the Promised Land. Their part was to believe what he told them and then act upon his promises, just like every other traveler.

What we have not known for certain through this story is whether or not Israel was going to fully trust God's promises. There have been some encouraging signs along the way but there have also been a number of troubling incidents of rebellion. It is in our story today that we find out which direction the generation of adults who were slaves in Egypt about a year and a half prior to this event are going to go. As we consider their story, we are going to see in a vivid picture of why it is that the only way you and I will make it safely through this wilderness world and into God's eternal kingdom is if we will live by faith in the promises God has made to us in and through Jesus.

MAIN POINT

Safe passage through this world and entry into heaven is only by faith in God's promises because...

I. God graciously works to show his trustworthiness (13:1-27)

It would be hard to overstate the level of excitement and anticipation of the people of Israel camped in the wilderness of Paran on the southern border of the Land of Canaan. Like first time homeowners on their way to the final closing at the bank or like first time parents driving to the hospital as the contractions of labor begin, they are almost at the end of a long journey. They are on the brink of obtaining their dream home that God has been promising for over 400 years. The Lord commands Moses to send 12 spies into the land. He wants them to report on the terrain and the number and strength of the people. He wants a report on the kinds of cities they live in, whether fortified or open encampments. But especially he wants them to report back on the fruitfulness

and fertility of the land including some samples of the produce from the land. Their purpose is to make a full report so that the people will be encouraged and strengthened in their desire to live in Canaan. He aims for them to have an accurate report of those they will fight so that they will not be surprised in any way.

In vv. 21-24 we have the report of the spies' journey into and through the land from the far southern border in the wilderness of Zin to the farthest northern border near Lebo-hamath. This was a journey of about 500 miles round trip and took them 40 days to complete. You will notice in v. 22 that the city of Hebron is emphasized. The valley of Eschol is right next to Hebron. This area of Canaan is where Abraham lived during most of his time in Canaan. Here is where the Lord showed him the stars and said "so shall your descendants be" and Abraham believed the Lord. This is where the Lord appeared to Abraham with two angels and Abraham fed them and the Lord told him that in one year Sarah would bear a son. This is where Isaac was born. This is where Abraham bought a field and cave to bury Sarah and it is where Abraham himself was buried. It is not an accident that the grapes and other fruit were brought from near Hebron.

The central place of Hebron in the narrative reminds the spies, the people of Israel when they received the report and we the readers of God's promises and his actions over the course of the past 450 years to make Israel a nation and to bring them out of Egypt and bring them to this place. God has done nothing but prove himself faithful in protecting Abraham's descendants and providing everything. He delivered them by mighty miracles from the clutches of the cruel Egyptians. He destroyed their army in the Red Sea. He has provided them the means by which he can safely live among them through the Law. He has given them food and water in the desert. He has led them by the pillar of cloud and fire. He has regularly reminded them about the beauty and fruitfulness of the land that he is going to give to them. Now he has sent some of their own leaders into the land to confirm with their own eyes the wonder of the place that he is giving to them. The men when they return confirm all that God has said, it is indeed a land gushing with milk and honey and they can see it with their own eyes as they see the fruit.

As we come to the end of v. 27 it is obvious that God has given them every reason to believe his promise that he is going to give them the land. He has proven his faithfulness and his power time and again. He has not done has not done these things for them because of them. Rather, he has acted according to his own gracious will. He has not dealt with them as they deserve but has continually provided and led them and taught them and forgave them by grace, contrary to what they deserve. While Israel has been favored with God's kindness in greater ways than all other nations, yet the Bible repeatedly says that God has dealt kindly with every human being and with every human nation. He has manifested his trustworthiness to all.

Paul explains this fact to the idol worshipping pagans of Lystra after he and Barnabas heal a crippled man and the local population tries to sacrifice an animal to them as if they were one of their gods taking on human appearance. He tells them (Acts 14:15-17), "Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men, of like nature with you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. In past generations he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways. Yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness." In Athens he told another group of idol worshippers, "The God who made the world and everything in it... is not served by human hands as if he needed anything for he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else." Every human being in the world has been given life by God. Every human being has been given every breath he or she has taken. Every human being has been given every pleasure he has experienced directly by the living God of grace. As Jesus said in Matthew 5, he pours out all this kindness without distinction, without paying attention to what men deserve. As Paul says in another place no human being will ever be able to complain that they did not know that there was a loving and trustworthy God over all of creation to whom they owed everything. The heavens and the earth declare the love and power and kindness and trustworthiness of the great Creator of all things.

You may not have been given all the mercy that Israel was given but you have been given more than sufficient grace to know there is a good and faithful God to whom you owe everything and whom you ought to trust and

love and adore above all things. There is no one sitting in this room who has not had overwhelming, undeserved kindness showered upon you so that you have no excuse for not trusting in this great and glorious God who has sent his son into the world to live and die and rise again to save sinners like us.

Safe passage through this world and entry into heaven is only by faith in God's promises because...

- *God graciously works to show his trustworthiness (13:1-27)*
- *And because...*

II. The whole world promises to give better gifts than God (13:28-14:4 & 10)

In v. 28, the spies, after declaring the goodness of the land to which Moses sent them insert a fateful “but”, though in the ESV it is translated “however.” I’m sure most of us have had a conversation like this. Someone is giving an explanation of their behavior or an apology and after making several agreeable statements will then say, BUT... We all know that what follows the “but” is what the person really thinks. Everything that came before is just cover. And so it is with these men. “Yes, the land is very fruitful, BUT, contrary to what Moses has told us, there are really big, well armed, numerous men living in heavily fortified cities in every corner of the land.” Their non-verbal disgust with the situation must have been clear because Caleb has to quiet the people down before he can say with great zeal, “Let us go up at once and occupy it for we are well able to overcome it.” Then the gloves come off; all pretense is dropped. The other spies declare that the land does not feed its inhabitants, rather it is like some great monster that devours those who live in it. Then they claim that the sons of Anak that they saw in Hebron are actually the descendants of the supernatural, demi-gods, the Nephilim, that inhabited the earth prior to the flood of Noah’s day. Like a mean big brother they seek to scare their siblings by saying, “There are monsters in the land!” They say they felt like edible grasshoppers when they were in these people’s cities and they claim they know all the people in the land think of Israel in that way.

The bad report that the spies give creates panic among the whole nation of Israel. That night the people cry out and wail in terror and despair. Groups of people gather around campfires and in tents and talk about their hopeless situation. The more they talk the angrier they become with Moses and Aaron, those trouble-making brothers who should have left well-enough alone and let them live as slaves in Egypt. They gather around Moses and Aaron and scream at them that it would be better to have died in Egypt or in the wilderness than to have come all this way only to be destroyed by warrior people who will subject their wives and children to the worst kind of slavery after they butcher the adult men. Then as they talk a plan forms in their minds and they begin to tell one another, let’s pick another leader and let’s go back to Egypt.

These people are saying the exact opposite of everything that God has said to them, indeed has said to Abraham and his descendants for hundreds of years. God says the land is a fruitful land that gushes with milk and honey; they say it is a land that devours those who live in it because it is so inhospitable. God says that he has given all the people who live there into their hands, none will be able to stand against them; they say that these giants will kill them and take their wives and children captive. God says Egypt is a place of misery; they say it is a good place to live. God says Moses and Aaron are their leaders; they say, let’s pick someone else who will do good for us by leading us back to Egypt.

These people have determined that God is not trustworthy. They have lost the fight of faith. They have stopped trusting in God and his promises. They do not believe that the land is a good land. They do not believe that God is able to destroy the Canaanites. They do not believe that Moses and Aaron can lead them to safety. But that does not mean they are not living by faith. They are living by faith. They believe the promise of life in Egypt. They believe in their own ability to traverse the desert and return to their former masters. They believe in the goodness of the Egyptians whose firstborn sons were killed about 18 months prior to this because of them. They believe in the promise of a new leader. They have looked at everything that God has done for them and promised to them and compared that to the luxury of Egypt and the obstacles before them and have decided that he cannot be trusted but the Egyptians can be trusted to welcome them with open arms.

What about you? Do you believe the promise that all of your sins are forgiven and you are bound for heaven not because of anything you have ever done or decided but only because of everything Jesus has done? Or are you believing what the world says: you are good enough for God just the way you are, based upon your own person and performance? Are you going back to Egypt by believing that you deserve God's love because you are a good person or you can't be loved by God because you are such a bad person? Or perhaps you say you are a Christian and you hear God say to you that you are to forgive that person who has hurt you and you are to be kind to them but you are believing what the world says, which is if you forgive them and are kind to them you'll just get hurt again? In other words, it's better to live full of bitterness towards the other person and looking for ways to hurt him than it is to live in the freedom of God's love and forgiveness by forgiving them. Or you hear God's promise to provide for you and his command that you give generously as evidence of your faith in his promise but you believe the world's promise that security can only be found in a full savings account. These Israelites have lost the fight of faith. They do not believe that what God wants to give them is better than everything in the universe and they do not believe that God has the power to give it to them. This is the same fight we are all in. Will we believe that having our sins forgiven and going to heaven to live with God forever is better than sex or money or security or respect of children or a hassle free life, better than everything? Or will we believe the promises that this world makes that these things are better and more certain sources of joy than God and all he promises?

Safe passage through this world and entry into heaven is only by faith in God's promises because...

- *God graciously works to show his trustworthiness*
- *The whole world promises to give better gifts than God*
- *And because...*

III. God sends messengers to remind us of God's promises (14:5-9)

Moses and Aaron fall on their faces in anguish and shock over such an open display of contempt for God and in terror over what God might do and in desperate intercession for these people. Then Joshua and Caleb, who also saw the land and the people and the cities in Canaan, stand before the people and tell them that the other 10 spies are lying to them. The land will not devour them; it is not an evil land but an exceedingly good land, gushing with milk and honey, just as God promised. They tell the people that the Canaanites cannot harm them, rather the Israelites will devour them the way a hungry man devours bread. The reason is because God has removed their protection and he is the one who will fight for them. However, they do remind the people that there is a condition for their entering into the Land of Promise: the condition is: "if the Lord delights in us." And the Lord will delight in them if they will not rebel against the Lord because they fear the people.

God has sent Joshua and Caleb to remind the people of what is true. They are preaching the gospel to them and reminding them of what a life of faith looks like. In the same way, God sends us to each other to remind one another of the promises of God and to warn each other about the danger of believing the promises of the world. Hebrews 3:12-13, "See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness." Friends we need to eagerly welcome and even invite others into our lives to tell us the gospel and to warn us about the consequences of not living by faith in Jesus to the end. If somebody actually works up the courage to come and talk to us about an area of unbelief they see in our lives, we should not get mad at them but humbly consider what they are saying. We must not be so proud and hard hearted to believe that we are always right or that we can never get a hard heart that turns away from God like the people of Israel. Children and young people, you should not resent having parents who confront you and warn you about believing the lies of this world and urge you to believe the promises of God. Their aim is not to keep you from having fun but to enable you to live in joy forever. When Joshua and Caleb finish their proclamation of God's truth the people of Israel do not repent but rather they agree that they should be stoned. They want to treat them as if they are the ones breaking the law of God, rather than themselves. The people are not the ones who are wrong, rather it is Moses, Aaron, Joshua and Caleb that are wrong. Most of us, when confronted, will not resort

to murder, we'll just get mad at and gossip about and ignore the person who confronted us. Don't do it. That might be the person God sent to rescue you from hell.

Safe passage through this world and entry into heaven is only by faith in God's promises because...

- *God graciously works to show his trustworthiness*
- *The whole world promises to give better gifts than God*
- *God sends messengers to remind us of God's promises*
- *And because...*

IV. God rejects those who reject his promises (14:11-12)

There is a limit to God's patience. While he is slow to get angry, yet he does get angry. This story reveals that awful reality. While the people of Israel begin picking up stones with which to kill the four leaders God shows up by the manifestation of his glory at the Tent of Meeting. He speaks to prostrate Moses. In the two rhetorical questions that he asks in v. 11 he reveals the heart of Israel's problem. Their rejection of Canaan and of Moses and their determination to go back to Egypt is nothing less than treating God with contempt. I can guarantee you that if you had asked any Israelite if they were despising the Lord in what they had said, they would have said no. They were simply facing the facts. They could not defeat giants who lived in forts. Being a slave in Egypt is better than being food for vultures while your wives and children are turned over to the barbaric people of Canaan. But, as God points out, the central problem is that they do not trust God, they do not have faith in him and in his promises. This is in spite of all that he has done for them. So for the people of Israel the miracles God performed for them in Egypt and in the desert did not lead them to faith but only increased their condemnation for not believing. Let this story persuade you of the foolishness of wanting to see a miracle. It is absolutely not true that if you saw a miracle you would believe. Miracles do not persuade anyone and these people are proof of that fact. All that miracles will do for you is bring you greater condemnation when you refuse to trust God and his promises in spite of the miracles.

Finally, God announces his just sentence upon these people. He is going to treat them the way he treated the Egyptians. He is going to send a plague upon them that will wipe them out. Then he is going to make a great nation out of Moses' descendants and fulfill his plan to save the world through Moses. Thus God will be faithful to his promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, just not through these rebellious people. He is done with them. So here is a good reason to keep living by faith in Jesus and all the promises God has made to us in him, if you do not live by faith in these promises then God will reject you. You will not go to heaven but you will experience God's anger forever in hell. Heed the words of Jesus who said it is those who endure to the end who will be saved. It is not those who prayed a prayer asking Jesus into their heart when they were 12 years old who will be saved but those who live by faith in Jesus to the end of their lives who will be saved. So believe what God has said and shown to be true by his mighty work of sending Jesus into the world to live and die and rise again so that every sinner who lives by faith will be brought safely into his eternal kingdom.

Safe passage through this world and entry into heaven is only by faith in God's promises because...

- *God graciously works to show his trustworthiness*
- *The whole world promises to give better gifts than God*
- *God sends messengers to remind us of God's promises*
- *God rejects those who reject his promises*

© Copyright 2010 John Swanson.

You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material in any format provided that:

- (1) you credit the author,
- (2) any modifications are clearly marked,
- (3) you do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction, and
- (4) you do not make more than 1,000 copies.

If you would like to post this material to the web, or if your intended use is other than outlined above, please contact River Hills Community Church, 2843 West Court Street, Janesville, WI 53548. (608) 758-0943. mail@riverhillsonline.org