

Perfect Love Confronts the Hard-Hearted

Numbers 13–14

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A Turning Point in the Wilderness

Numbers 13–14 marks a turning point in the book of Numbers. The people of Israel have left Mount Sinai and made a direct trip to the wilderness of Paran — the staging area for their entry into the land of promise. Before they cross over, however, twelve spies are sent out, one representing each of the twelve tribes. The tribe of Levi is notably absent from the list, likely because the Levites receive no territorial inheritance. Two names on the list will be heard again: Caleb, from the tribe of Judah — the largest of the tribes — and Joshua, from the tribe of Ephraim, one of the smallest.

Moses gives these twelve men a specific reconnaissance mission. They are to assess the land itself — whether it is good or bad, rich or poor, forested or bare. They are to evaluate its inhabitants — whether they are strong or weak, few or many — and its cities, whether they are open camps or fortified strongholds. And at the end of his instructions, Moses adds one more request: bring back some of the fruit. Whatever else Moses meant by that, it was his way of asking for evidence of the land’s abundance.

So the twelve men go. We are given a travel log of the places they visited: *“They went up and spied out the land from the wilderness of Zin to Rehob, near Lebo-hamath. They went up into the Negeb and came to Hebron. Ahiman, Sheshai, and Talmi, the descendants of Anak, were there. (Hebron was built seven years before Zoan in Egypt.)”* After forty days they return, carrying samples of the fruit, and they give their report.

The Report and the Rebellion

The opening of the report is everything Moses could have hoped for: *“We came to the land to which you sent us. It flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit.”* That phrase — flowing with milk and honey — is a way of saying the land is rich, beautiful, and bountiful. Every question Moses asked is answered in the affirmative: yes, the land is good; yes, it is rich; yes, there are trees, as the fruit in their hands makes plain.

But then comes the *however*. “*However, the people who dwell in the land are strong, and the cities are fortified and very large. And besides, we saw the descendants of Anak there.*” They go on to name the peoples occupying the various regions — the Amalekites in the Negeb, the Hittites, Jebusites, and Amorites in the hill country, the Canaanites along the sea and the Jordan.

They should have stopped there. They had answered the questions. But they didn’t stop. And it is here that Caleb speaks up — almost interrupting them: “*Let us go up at once and occupy it, for we are well able to overcome it.*” The response from the other ten is immediate: “*We are not able to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we are.*”

And then, to make their case, they begin to exaggerate. The same land they just described as flowing with milk and honey they now call “*a land that devours its inhabitants.*” The inhabitants, they say, are all of great height — Nephilim, even, the race of giants mentioned back in Genesis 6 in connection with great wickedness. My reading of Genesis 6 is that the Nephilim were destroyed in the flood; I do not recall them boarding the ark with Noah. But here the ten spies invoke them, and then add this: “*We seemed to ourselves like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them.*” Grasshoppers. It is worth noting that the people of the land were probably taller, for no more mysterious a reason than that they had good nutrition — evidence of which was dangling from the spies’ own hands. But grasshoppers is not an observation; it is a surrender to fear dressed up as a field report.

And the congregation of Israel buys it entirely. Numbers 14:1–4 records what follows: “*Then all the congregation raised a loud cry, and the people wept that night. And all the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron. 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! Why is the LORD bringing us into this land, to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become a prey. Would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?’ And they said to one another, ‘Let us choose a leader and go back to Egypt.’*”

Notice what happens in those verses. First, there is a wish: *we want to die in this wilderness*. Then there is a prediction: *our wives and children will perish*. And then there is a sin: they reject the Lord outright. Choosing their own leader — in place of the one God appointed — is a way of saying to God, *your will, your way, your plan is not what we want*.

Moses and Aaron tear their garments and fall on their faces before the assembly. This is not an act of worship; it is an act of desperate pleading. *Don’t do this. Don’t go down this road. Don’t say what you are saying*. The path they are setting foot on leads only to destruction.

Joshua speaks up with Caleb: “*The land, which we passed through to spy it out, is an exceedingly good land. If the LORD delights in us, he will bring us into this land and give it to us, a land that flows with milk and honey. Only do not rebel against the LORD. And do not fear the*

people of the land, for they are bread for us. Their protection is removed from them, and the LORD is with us; do not fear them.”

The congregation’s response? They call for stones. Their hearts are so hardened that they would sooner kill Moses, Aaron, Joshua, and Caleb than hear another word of faith.

The Problem in the World

This passage troubles me deeply. How can people who witnessed the mighty acts of God reject him so completely? These are the people who saw the judgments fall on Egypt — water turned to blood, thunderstorms and hail and fire, the death of the firstborn. They passed through the Red Sea and watched Pharaoh’s army destroyed behind them. They stood at Sinai, entered into coven-

ant with the living God, and received his glory dwelling in their midst. And now they say: *we do not want him*. Their rejection is so complete that they actually wish to die in the wilderness rather than move forward with him. I do not understand this hardness of heart. I don’t. But it is real — not just then, but today as well.

Not long ago I was conducting a funeral, and in the course of that service I proclaimed that death is not final, that the Lord has provided a way through it. There was a young man in attendance who was visibly furious — shaking his head, mouthing words at me. And what struck me was this: we were literally in the presence of death, surrounded by grief, and his heart was so hard that he would not receive a single word of hope.

Or consider another situation I encountered. A man loses his job and cannot support his family. He asks for prayer, asks for help. The church responds generously, many pray, and the Lord answers — the man finds a job better than the one he lost. Does he give thanks to the Lord and press deeper into faith? No. He has an affair, divorces his wife, and abandons his children. What do you do with that? Why do you do this to a God who has been so good to you? Why is the heart so hard as to reject him?

I could describe many such stories — healings, answered prayers, remarkable provisions — all followed by the same pattern we see here in Numbers. The Lord shows himself faithful, and the people choose not to move further and deeper into fellowship with him, but instead return to what they were before they cried out for help. I do not understand this hardness of heart.

The book of Hebrews speaks directly to this, in chapters 3 and 4. Beginning at 3:7, the writer says: *“Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, ‘Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the wilderness.’ ... Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today,’ that none of you may be*

hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. ... 'Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.'” And then, in 4:11: *“Let us therefore strive to enter that rest.”*

The writer of Hebrews is using the story of entering the promised land as an image for entering the Lord’s rest — and he builds from that image a full theology of grace. We know and have fellowship with God through rest, not through work. It is the Lord’s work that brings us rest. Notice what he identifies as the cause of a hard heart: the deceitfulness of sin. Verse 13 again — *exhort one another every day, that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.* A hard heart is not simply a failure of willpower. It is the progressive embracing of lies that enable sin, and its end result is unbelief and the rejection of God himself.

Grace in the Text

We return now to Numbers 14, and the Lord’s response to the people’s hard-heartedness.

Before reading the passage, a word about how to read it. Numbers 14:11–35 is a dialogue between the Lord and Moses in which it appears that Moses changes God’s mind. Some people read it this way and conclude that God is capricious, changeable, or not fully knowing — a reading that tends toward what is called open theism or process theology, a set of ideas that denies God’s omniscience, immutability, and sovereignty. Those theologies are mistaken, and this passage does not support them.

So how should we read this dialogue? In ancient literature — and in some literature today — it was common practice to present philosophy and theology through dialogue between characters. The most famous examples may be the dialogues of Plato. In our own Bible, we have the dialogues of Job. Dialogue is an ancient and honorable way of presenting wisdom. That is what is happening here. Through the exchange between Moses and the Lord, we are being given a theology — a way of understanding how the problem of sin and the hardness of the human heart is ultimately resolved. This dialogue is therefore not peripheral to the text; it is the heart of it.

The Lord speaks first: *“How long will this people despise me? And how long will they not believe in me, in spite of all the signs that I have done among them? I will strike them with the pestilence and disinherit them, and I will make of you a nation greater and mightier than they.”*

Two truths are being stated here. First, because of the people’s sin, unbelief, and rejection of the Lord, the just consequence is death. They deserve to be removed as a people, cast out from the Lord’s presence. Second, because of Moses’ righteousness, he deserves to be blessed — to enter the land, to enjoy the Lord’s presence, to become, as the Lord says, a great nation. One

party is worthy of punishment and death. The other is worthy of life and inheritance. That is the truth being placed on the table.

Moses responds at length: *“Then the Egyptians will hear of it, for you brought up this people in your might from among them, and they will tell the inhabitants of this land. They have heard that you, O LORD, are in the midst of this people. For you, O LORD, are seen face to face, and your cloud stands over them and you go before them, in a pillar of cloud by day and in a pillar of fire by night. Now if you kill this people as one man, then the nations who have heard your fame will say, ‘It is because the LORD was not able to bring this people into the land that he swore to give to them that he has killed them in the wilderness.’ And now, please let the power of the Lord be great as you have promised, saying, ‘The LORD is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression, but he will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, to the third and the fourth generation.’”*

In this reply, Moses is presenting another truth within the dialogue: everything God does must be — and is — in accordance with God’s glory. The word *glory* does not appear in these verses, but that is precisely what is being discussed. We see it when Moses speaks of God’s *fame* (verse 15: *“the nations who have heard your fame”*). We see it when Moses speaks of God’s *power* (verse 17: *“let the power of the Lord be great”*). And we see it most clearly when Moses speaks of God’s *nature*, quoting the great declaration of Exodus 34: *“The LORD is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression, but he will by no means clear the guilty.”*

That description of God comes from a decisive moment in Israel’s history. About a year earlier, when the covenant was first established and Moses asked to see the Lord’s glory, the Lord responded by saying that no one can see his glory and live — but Moses could *hear* it. And so, in Exodus 34, the Lord passed over Moses, shielding him, and as he did he proclaimed his own glory, which is his name, his nature:

“The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation.”

This is God’s glory. His glory is his name being known. His glory is his attributes — sovereignty, power, faithfulness. His glory is his nature. And everything God does must be done in accordance with — and to the end of — that glory.

Before we move on, one phrase in that declaration requires careful attention: *“keeping steadfast love for thousands of generations, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation.”* This does not mean that God holds children responsible for their

parents' sins. Ezekiel 18:20 is unambiguous: "*The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father.*" What we are seeing in Exodus 34 is a biblical merism — a rhetorical device that uses two contrasting extremes to express a totality. The Bible is full of them. "*In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth*" — the extremes standing for everything in between. "*The tree of the knowledge of good and evil*" — good and evil as the extremes, meaning a tree of all knowledge. Here in the revelation of God's glory, the two extremes are:

On one side, steadfast love kept for thousands of generations. On the other, the iniquity of the fathers visited to the third and fourth generation.

The merism communicates several things at once: God is perfect in love; God is perfect in justice; and God's love is a thousand times greater than his wrath. That is the glory of God — perfect love and perfect justice, bound together, with love so vast that it swallows the comparison whole. May the whole earth be filled with not only the knowledge that God *is*, but who he *is*.

Now let us bring the problem into focus. The people have hard hearts and have rejected God. They deserve to be removed from his presence, and they deserve death. Moses, the righteous one whom God sent to redeem this people and bring them into covenant, deserves life and the Lord's inheritance. And God, who acts in accordance with his glory, must be both perfectly loving and perfectly just.

If the Lord simply passes over the people's sin and does nothing, his justice is compromised and his glory is diminished. If he does as he first declared — strike the people with death and give Moses the inheritance — then where is his perfect love and his forgiveness? That too diminishes his glory. Neither option, taken alone, honors the fullness of who he is.

The resolution comes in verse 19. Moses is still speaking, and he says: "*Please pardon the iniquity of this people, according to the greatness of your steadfast love, just as you have forgiven this people, from Egypt until now.*"

Do you see what Moses is sacrificing in that request? By interceding for the forgiveness of the people, he is forfeiting what he himself deserves. Because of this prayer, Moses will not enter the land. He will die in the wilderness. He will not receive the inheritance. He will not become a great nation. Moses is taking the penalty that is due upon the people and giving them the life and blessing and inheritance that belong to him. *Pardon the iniquity of this people, according to the greatness of your steadfast love* — a love a thousand times greater than your wrath. This willingness, this exchange, is a form of vicarious atonement.

The Lord responds in verse 20: "*I have pardoned, according to your word. But truly, as I live, and as all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the LORD...*" God's perfect love and perfect justice will both be accomplished. What follows, in verses 26–35, is the outworking of that twofold reality. The Lord gives the people precisely what they asked for. They said they wanted to die in the wilderness rather than enter the land — and so they will. They predicted that their

children would die in the wilderness — but on that point they were wrong. Their children will live. Their children will see the inheritance. And so forty years in the wilderness begins. The children will suffer for the faithlessness of their parents, but they will also witness God’s love a thousand times over — in the wilderness itself, and when at last they enter the land. Of the twelve spies, only two will cross over: Joshua and Caleb. Why? Because of their faith in the Lord.

Grace in Our World

Let me close with a few things this passage means for us.

First, the gospel. What Moses did for the Israelites, Jesus has done for us — and Jesus is incomparably greater than Moses. Because of the Father’s perfect love, he sent the Son to redeem us from sin and from the curse of death. And the Son, Jesus the Christ, accomplished this through his own vicarious atonement on the cross. He took what belongs to us — our death, our punishment, our separation from God — and gave to us what belongs to him: his eternal life, his inheritance, his fellowship with the Father. That is the gospel. All who believe in him will not perish, but will enter the place where God dwells. This gift is offered to all, and it is received by faith.

Second, faith. Our passage gives us a vivid image of faith in the person of Caleb. When the people cried that there were giants in the land, Caleb said, *we can take them — let’s go right now*. They did not go. They spent forty years in the wilderness instead. But when those forty years were over, and after the long military campaign to take the land, Caleb — now eighty-five years old — speaks up again. We find him in Joshua 14: “*Where is my inheritance? I have been waiting forty-five years for this. And I want the land where the giants live.*” The place that terrified everyone else is the very place Caleb wants. At eighty-five years old, he climbs the hill to Hebron and faces the Anakim, as if to say: *I told you I would be back*. His words are recorded in Joshua 14:12: “*So now give me this hill country of which the LORD spoke on that day, for you heard on that day how the Anakim were there, with great fortified cities. It may be that the LORD will be with me, and I shall drive them out just as the LORD said.*”

Let the promised land stand as a picture of the Christian life. When a person follows Jesus in faith and enters into fellowship with the living God, they are brought into a place of real blessing — a life that genuinely overflows with milk and honey. But they are not yet perfected, and the land is not yet fully cleared. In the life of the believer, there are still giants to be fought: addictions, besetting sins, pride, suffering, disappointment, the long-unhealed wounds of the soul. Following Jesus does not mean the brokenness is instantly mended, nor that its healing is painless. But as Caleb and Joshua both declared — we trust the Lord, we are strengthened by his grace, and he is victorious in our lives by his love. Continue to fight the good fight.

Third, your witness. The people who do not yet know Jesus can only hear about this promised life through us — through Christians. We are the spies who bring back a report about the goodness of the land. Unfortunately, some give a bad report and discourage the world, and so many do not enter. May we be people of good faith, who give a good report of what the Lord has done and is doing, so that many may enter this land to the glory of God.

Amen.