

NOTES
ON
THE BOOK OF NUMBERS

by

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"Things new and old."

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by

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Numbers 13

"And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying, Send thou men that they may search the land of Canaan, which I give unto the children of Israel: of every tribe of their fathers shall ye send a man, every one a ruler among them. And Moses by the commandment of the Lord sent them from the wilderness of Paran" (Verses 1-3).

In order fully to understand the foregoing commandment, we must look at it in connection with a passage in the Book of Deuteronomy, where Moses, in going over the facts of Israel's marvellous history in the wilderness, reminds them of the following important and interesting circumstance:

"And when we departed from Horeb, we went through all that great and terrible wilderness, which ye saw by the way of the mountain of the Amorites, as the Lord our God commanded us; and we came to Kadesh-Barnea, and I said unto you, Ye are come unto the mountain of the Amorites, which the Lord our God doth give unto us. Behold, the Lord thy God hath set the land before thee: go up and possess it, as the Lord God of thy fathers hath said unto thee; fear not, neither be discouraged. And ye came near unto me every one of you, and said, we will send men before us, and they shall search us out the land, and bring us word again by what way we must go up, and into what cities we shall come" (Deuteronomy 1:19-22).

Now here we have the moral root of the fact stated in Numbers 13:2. It is evident that the Lord gave the commandment concerning the spies because of the moral condition of the people. Had

they been governed by simple faith, they would have acted on those soul-stirring words of Moses, "**Behold, the Lord thy God hath set the land before thee: go up and possess it, as the Lord God of thy fathers hath said unto thee; fear not, neither be discouraged.**" There is not a single syllable about spies, in this splendid passage. What does faith want of spies, when it has the word and the presence of the living GOD? If the Lord had given them a land, it must be worth having. And had He not? Yes, truly; and not only so, but He had borne testimony to the nature and character of that land in the following glowing words, "**For the Lord thy God bringeth thee into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and depths that spring out of valleys and hills; a land of wheat, and barley, and vines, and fig trees, and pomegranates, a land of oil olive and honey; a land wherein thou shalt eat bread without scarceness, thou shalt not lack anything in it; a land whose stones are iron, and out of whose hills thou mayest dig brass**" (Deuteronomy 8:7-9).

Should not all this have sufficed for Israel? Ought they not to have been satisfied with the testimony of GOD? had not He spied out the land for them, and told them all about it? And was not this enough? What need of sending men to spy the land? Did not GOD know all about it! Was there a spot "**from Dan to Beersheba**" with which he was not perfectly acquainted? Had He not selected this land and allotted it, in His own eternal counsels, for the seed of Abraham His friend? Did He not know all about the difficulties? and was He not able to surmount them? Why, then, did they "**come near every one of them, and say, We will send men before us, and they shall search us out the land, and bring us word again!**"

Ah! reader, these questions come right home to our hearts. They find us out, and make thoroughly manifest where we are. It is not for us to sit down and coolly animadvert upon the ways of Israel in the wilderness; to point out error here, and failure there? We must take all these things as types set before us for our admonition. They are beacons, erected by a friendly and faithful hand, to warn us off from the dangerous shoals, quicksands, and rocks which lie along our course, and threaten our safety. This, we may be sure, is the true way to read every page of Israel's history, if we would reap the profit which our GOD has designed for us in penning such a record.

But, it may be the reader is disposed to ask a question here. "Did not the Lord expressly command Moses to send spies. And if so, how was it wrong for Israel to send them? True, the Lord did command Moses to send the spies, in Numbers 13; but this was in consequence of the moral condition of the people, as set forth in Deuteronomy 1. We shall not understand the former unless we read it in the light of the latter. we learn, most distinctly, from Deuteronomy 1:22, that the idea of sending the spies had its origin in the heart of Israel. GOD saw their moral condition, and He issued a command in full keeping therewith.

If the reader will turn to the opening pages of the first book of Samuel, he will find something similar in the matter of the appointment of a king.

The Lord commanded Samuel to hearken to the voice of the people, and make them a king (I Samuel 8:22). Was it that He approved of the plan? Most surely not; on the contrary, He declares plainly that it was a positive rejection of Himself. Why then command Samuel to appoint a king! The command was given in consequence of Israel's condition. They were growing weary of the position of entire dependence upon an unseen arm; and they longed for an arm of flesh. They

desired to be like the nations around them, and to have a king who should go out before them, and fight their battles for them. Well, GOD gave them their request, and they were very speedily called to prove the worthlessness of their plan. Their king proved a most complete failure, and they had to learn that it was an evil and a bitter thing to forsake the living GOD and lean on a broken reed of their own selection.

Now, we see the same thing in the matter of the spies. There can be no question, in the mind of any spiritual person who studies the entire subject, as to the fact that the scheme of sending the spies was the fruit of unbelief. A simple heart that trusted GOD would never have thought of such a thing. What! are we to send poor mortals to spy out a land which GOD has graciously given to us, and which He has so fully and faithfully described? Far be the thought; nay, rather let us say, "It is enough; the land is the gift of GOD, and as such it must be good. His Word is enough for our hearts; we want no spies; we seek for no mortal testimony to confirm the word of the living GOD. He has given; He has spoken; this is enough."

But alas! Israel was not in a condition to adopt such language. They would send spies. They wanted them, their hearts craved them: the desire for them lay in the very depths of the soul; the Lord knew this, and hence He issued a commandment in direct reference to the moral state of the people.

The reader would do well to ponder this subject, in the light of Scripture. He will need to compare Deuteronomy 1 with Numbers 13. It is possible he may find difficulty in judging of the true nature and moral roots of the act of sending the spies, from the fact that the thing was ultimately done in pursuance of "**the commandment of the Lord.**" But we must ever remember that the fact of the Lord's commanding the thing to be done does not, by any means, prove that the people were right in seeking it. The giving of the law at Mount Sinai; the sending of the spies; and the appointment of a king, are all proofs of this. No doubt GOD overruled all these things for His own glory and for man's ultimate blessing; but still the law could not be viewed as the expression of the heart of GOD; the setting up of a king was a positive rejection of Himself; and we may say that the sending of men to spy out the land of promise proved, very distinctly, that the heart of Israel was not fully satisfied with the Lord. The whole affair was the fruit of their weakness and unbelief, though acquiesced in by GOD because of their condition, and overruled by Him, in His infinite goodness and unerring wisdom, for the unfolding of His ways and the display of His glory. All this comes fully out as we pursue the history.

"And Moses sent them (the spies) to spy out the land of Canaan, and said unto them, Get you up this way southward, and go up into the mountain: and see the land what it is; and the people that dwelleth therein, whether they be strong or weak, few or many; and what the land is that they dwell in, whether it be good or bad; and what cities they be that they dwell in, whether in tents, or in strong holds; and what the land is, whether it be fat or lean, whether there be wood therein or not. And be ye of good courage, and bring of the fruit of the land. Now the time was the time of the first ripe grapes. So they went up, and searched the land from the wilderness of Zin unto Rehob, as men come to Hamath . . . And they came unto the brook of Eshcol, and cut down from thence a branch with one cluster of grapes, and they bare it between two upon a staff; and they brought of the pomegranates, and of the figs. The place was called the brook Eshcol, because of the cluster of grapes which the children of Israel cut down from thence. And they returned from searching of

the land after forty days. And they went and came to Moses, and to Aaron, and to all the congregation of the children of Israel, unto the wilderness of Paran, to Kadesh; and brought back word unto them, and unto all the congregation, and showed them the fruit of the Land. And they told him, and said, We came unto the land whither thou sentest us, and surely it floweth with milk and honey; and this is the fruit of it" (Numbers 13:17-27).

Here, then, was the fullest confirmation of all that the Lord had said concerning the land - the testimony of twelve men as to the fact that the land flowed with milk and honey - the testimony of their own senses as to the character of the fruit of the land. Furthermore, there was the telling fact that twelve men had actually been in the land, had spent forty days in travelling up and down therein, had drunk of its springs and eaten of its fruits. And what, according to the judgment of faith, would have been the plain inference to be drawn from such a fact? Why, simply, that the same hand which had conducted twelve men into the land could conduct the whole congregation.

But alas! the people were not governed by faith, but by dark and depressing unbelief; and even the spies themselves - the very men who had been sent for the purpose of assuring and confirming the congregation - even they, with two brilliant exceptions, were under the power of the same God-dishonouring spirit. In short, the whole scheme proved a failure. The issue only made manifest the true condition of the hearts of the people. Unbelief was dominant. The testimony was plain enough: "**We came unto the land whither thou sentest us, and surely it floweth with milk and honey; and this is the fruit of it.**"

There was nothing whatever lacking on GOD's side of the question. The land was all that He had said, the spies themselves being witnesses; but let us hearken to what follows.

"Nevertheless the people be strong that dwell in the land, and the cities are walled, and very great: and moreover we saw the children of Anak there" (Verse 28).

There is always sure to be a "**nevertheless**" where man is concerned, and when unbelief is at work. The unbelieving spies saw the difficulties - great cities, high walls, tall giants. All these things they saw; but they did not see the Lord at all. They looked at the things that were seen, rather than at the things that were unseen. Their eye was not fixed upon Him who is invisible. Doubtless, the cities were great; but GOD was greater. The walls were high; but GOD was higher. The giants were strong but GOD was stronger.

Thus it is that faith ever reasons.

- faith reasons from GOD to the difficulties: it begins with Him.
- unbelief, on the contrary, reasons from the difficulties to GOD: it begins with them.

This makes all the difference. It is not that we are to be insensible to the difficulties; neither are we to be reckless. Neither insensibility nor yet recklessness is faith. There are some easy-going people who seem to get along through life on the principle of taking things by the smooth handle. This is not faith. Faith looks the difficulties straight in the face; it is fully alive to the roughness of the handle. It is not ignorant, not indifferent - not reckless; but what? **IT BRINGS IN THE LIVING GOD.** It looks to Him; it leans on Him; it draws from Him. Here lies the grand

secret of its power. It cherishes the calm and deep conviction that there never was a wall too high for the Almighty GOD - never a city too great - never a giant too strong. In short, faith is the only thing that gives GOD His proper place; and, as a consequence, is the only thing that lifts the soul completely above the influences of surrounding circumstances, be they what they may.

Of this precious faith, Caleb was the exponent, when he said, "**Let us go up at once and possess it; for we are well able to overcome it.**" These are the pure accents of that lively faith that glorifies GOD and makes nothing of circumstances.

But alas! the great majority of the spies were no more governed by this lively faith than the man who sent them; and hence, the one believer was talked down by the ten infidels.

"The men that went up with him said, We be not able to go up against the people."

The language of infidelity was flatly opposed to the language of faith. The latter, looking at GOD, said, "**We are well able.**" The former, looking at the difficulties, said, "**We are not able.**" Thus it was and thus it is. The eyes of faith are ever covered by the living GOD, and therefore difficulties are not seen. The eyes of unbelief are covered with the circumstances, and therefore GOD is not seen. Faith brings in GOD, and therefore all is bright and easy. Unbelief always shuts GOD out, and therefore all is dark and difficult.

"And they brought up an evil report of the land which they had searched unto the children of Israel, saying, The land, through which we have gone to search it, is a land that eateth up the inhabitants thereof; and all the people that we saw in it are men of a great stature. And there we saw the giants, the sons of Anak, which come of the giants; and we were in our own sight as grasshoppers, and so we were in their sight."

Not a word about GOD. He is entirely shut out. Had they thought of Him - had they brought the giants into comparison with Him, then it would have made not one whit of difference as to whether they themselves were grasshoppers, or whether they were men. But, in point of fact they, by their shameful unbelief, reduced the GOD of Israel to the level of a grasshopper.

It is very remarkable, that whenever infidelity is at work, it will always be found characterized by this one fact, namely, it shuts out GOD. This will be found true in all ages, in all places, and under all circumstances. There is no exception. Infidelity can take account of human affairs, it can reason upon them, and draw conclusions from them; but all its reasonings and all its conclusions are based upon the exclusion of GOD. The force of its arguments depends upon shutting Him out, and keeping Him out. Only introduce GOD, and all the reasonings of infidelity crumble into dust beneath your feet. Thus, in the scene before us, What is faith's reply to all the objections advanced by those ten unbelievers? Its one simple, all-satisfying reply, to which there can be no rejoinder, is - GOD!

Reader, do you know anything of the force and value of this most blessed answer!

- Do you know GOD? Does He fill the entire range of your soul's vision?
- Is He the answer to your every question? the solution of your every difficulty?
- Do you know the reality of walking, day by day, with the living GOD?

- Do you know the tranquillizing power of leaning upon Him through all the changes and chances of this mortal life?

If not, let me entreat of you not to go on for one hour in your present state. The way is open. GOD has revealed Himself in the face of JESUS CHRIST, as the relief, the resource, and the refuge of every needy soul. Look to Him now - even now, "**while he may be found; call upon him while he is near.**" "**Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved;**" and "**He that believeth shall never be confounded.**"

But if, on the other hand, you do, through grace, know GOD as your Saviour - your Father, then seek to glorify Him in all your ways, by a childlike unquestioning confidence in all things. Let Him be a perfect covering for your eyes, under all circumstances, and thus, in spite of all difficulties, your soul shall be kept in perfect peace.

~ end of chapter 13 ~

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