

Lesson #9: The Twelve Spies (Numbers 12-14)

From Sinai to the Promised Land

As the result of the golden calf incident, Israel is detained at Sinai for an entire year. Moses goes back up the mountain and receives Leviticus, *The Holiness Code*. This code of religious practice (both liturgical and moral) is closely linked to original instructions for the sanctuary given to Moses.²¹⁹ *The Holiness Code*, which outlines the moral life for God's chosen people, makes up the heart of Leviticus.²²⁰ Two simple principles, "You shall be holy; for I the Lord your God am holy" and "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" define it.²²¹ These two verses sum up the entire ethic of Leviticus and the whole Law of God. The people now have clear guidelines by which they are to live.

After the worship of the golden calf and the establishment of the Levitical priesthood, Israel sets off for Canaan, the Promised Land. It is a twelve-month journey during which the people are trained in the new laws that are to govern Israel. These are specific laws to guide the worship and moral life of Israel. The laws teach Israel how to be a holy people, set apart for the Lord – and to stop them from worshipping Egyptian gods. The book of Leviticus, which follows Exodus, does not contain new historical events, but outlines the laws that now govern Israel. These laws, we must remember, are not given to keep Israel enslaved, but to free them from their attachment to the worship and culture of Egypt.

The next historical events are presented in the book of Numbers. It is called Numbers because it begins with a census of all the tribes of Israel, and each of the tribes are identified and named. After the census is complete, the book offers an account of Israel's wanderings from Sinai to Canaan. For this reason Hebrew tradition calls the book "In the Wilderness." Most people are familiar with the fact that it is during this time that Israel spends forty years wandering in the desert. Forty years is an awfully long time to be wandering through the desert, and this seems like a cruel test placed on Israel, especially since almost all of the original Israelites die before reaching the Promised Land. Why would God want them to suffer for forty years in the wilderness? We will see that this is not God's original plan, but it is the result of Israel's continued lack of trust. They could have immediately entered the Canaan, but failed to trust the Lord's power to fulfill His promise and need to learn better how to entrust themselves to God.

The Promised Land, which is located just a couple week's journey from Sinai, is well within quick access to Israel, and yet we know they spend forty years wandering. Why?

The Twelve Spies

Israel arrives just outside the Promised Land and the Lord tells Moses to send out spies, one from each of the twelve tribes, to scout out the land they are to take.²²² Moses says

²¹⁹ Exodus 25-31; 35-40

²²⁰ Leviticus 17-24

²²¹ Leviticus 19:2 and 19:18; Jesus himself later says this as reported in Matthew 22:34-40, Mark 12:28-31; and Luke 10:25-28.

²²² Numbers 13; see Deuteronomy 1 where Moses explains what happens to them.

to the people, “be of good courage” since the Lord is on our side.²²³ God’s chosen people are finally on the threshold of having the promise that they would receive the land of Canaan of Genesis 12 fulfilled. All they need to do is to trust that God will deliver the land to them.

For forty days the twelve spies scouted the land, even bringing back some of the fruit as a sampling of just how good the land is. They report that the land is filled with “milk and honey,” that is, full of fruit, with water and all the things they do not have in the desert.²²⁴ This report must have sounded like music to the ears of the Israelites. Ten of the spies, however, do not end their report with this good news. They report that seven powerful nations and an army too strong for them to overtake occupy the land. The spies say the cities are too fortified and Israel is severely outnumbered and outgunned.²²⁵ The spies conclude that they have no chance of defeating these people. It is a mission impossible to take the Promised Land for them.

The report leads to despair among the people. As the Scripture says, “Then all the congregation raised a loud cry; and the people wept that night.”²²⁶ They are so close, and yet so far from their goal. The people, again, revolt against Moses and Yahweh. “And all the people of Israel murmured 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 does the Lord bring 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?’”²²⁷

Amazingly, after all God had done for them they continue to distrust Him. They think that what God asks of them is impossible and so they do not even want to try. They despair to the point that they want to go back to Egypt (how many times have we heard this already?). Why do they want to go back into slavery in Egypt? Perhaps they are still hanging onto the sins of Egypt and would rather remain slaves in their sin than free under the commands of God. It was easier for them to submit to the rule of Pharaoh and participate in Egyptian culture than to trust the Lord and obey his commands. So, it is not so much that they think they are overmatched, but that they do not have faith in God. They had already defeated the Egyptian army by the “hand of God,” but they do not have enough faith to think that God will do it again.

Joshua and Caleb

Two of the twelve spies agree with the assessment of the majority report, but they come to another conclusion. Joshua and Caleb agree that they are outmatched and outnumbered militarily, but they have trust in the Lord that He will make them victorious. It seems impossible, but they believe God will fulfill His promise. Their trust in God’s promise gives them reason to hope that they can win the Promised Land. They tell the

²²³ Numbers 13:20

²²⁴ Numbers 13:27

²²⁵ Numbers 13:31-32

²²⁶ Numbers 14:1

²²⁷ Numbers 14:2

people, “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 which 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.”²²⁸

Joshua and Caleb are great models of faith, yet sadly, but predictably, the people reject their message. Israel despairs in the situation and fails to trust in the Lord. They even call for the death of Joshua and Caleb. The very sight of the two faithful spies is more than the people’s conscience can handle. The masses of people want to heal their consciences by destroying the presence of that which convicts them in their lack of trust (which is a partial explanation of why the Catholic Church is often the target of ridicule). The Lord, however, saves Joshua and Caleb and does not let the wish of the people to be carried out. God’s anger is enflamed and He says to Moses, “How long will they not believe in me, in spite of the signs which I have wrought among them?”²²⁹ This word “believe” is from the Hebrew, *amin*, or amen. When we say “amen” we are saying “I believe” or “I trust in the Lord.” This is what God asks of Israel but they fail, again.

God tells Moses that He will strike down the people and start fresh with Moses. This must have sounded like a tempting proposal to Moses. He would receive all the glory and blessings of the Lord and take the place of Abraham as the father in faith. But instead, as a humble leader to the people, Moses pleads with God to remain faithful to His promise and show mercy on Israel. Moses is not interested in self-gain, but in the fulfillment of God’s original promise. So we see it is Moses’ intercession again that leads God to pardon Israel. We saw this once before with the golden calf. It is this type of meekness in a leader that brings blessings rather than curses on the people. This is another type or image of Christ. Jesus could have kept the glory for himself, but instead submits himself to suffering and humiliation for the good of all.

Forty Years

While Moses did succeed in saving Israel, their unbelief still requires punishment. God says to the people, “According to the number of the days in which you spied out the land, forty days, for every day a year, you shall bear your iniquity, forty years, and you shall know my displeasure.”²³⁰ This is why they wander through the desert for forty years. Not because God is cruel; God gives them exactly what they want. The Israelites do not want to go in; they want to go back to Egypt.²³¹ So now they cannot go in. We see that Israel despairs, they failed to trust God, and did not think this mission was possible, so they do not even try.²³² This is the result of despair – the refusal to even try to reach the goal under the excuse that it is impossible. They could not go into the Promised Land because they do not want to. They want to satisfy their sinful desires back in Egypt. In a similar way, God calls us to holiness, to become saints, yet we say, “I could never

²²⁸ Numbers 14:7-9

²²⁹ Numbers 14:11

²³⁰ Exodus 14:34

²³¹ Numbers 14:3

²³² Numbers 14:20-38

become a saint.” This appears to be humility or even despair, when in truth it is our strong desire to cling to our habitual sins and our lack of desire to rid ourselves of them with God’s help through prayer, the sacraments and virtue. We say, “I can’t become a saint” when we really mean, “I do not want to become a saint if it means giving up the sins I like.” So we find ourselves right back at the main theme of the Exodus, “Whom will you serve?”

The forty years wandering in the desert, of course, can be related to the forty days of Lent. The symbolism is that there must be detachment from the old creation in order to let God bring about new life. Sin has consequences, and in order to receive the new life there must be a death to sin and a spiritual journey to the Promised Land, heaven and the life of grace.

Despair or Hope?

This story of Israel’s failure in faith is a powerful lesson of trust. Israel is called to trust the Lord that he would deliver on His promise and bring them into the Promised Land, even as it looked impossible. This has been a theme of the entire story of salvation. God calls us to trust in Him. If we fail to trust, as Adam and Eve failed to do, we suffer the consequences of sin. God will always remain faithful, but our sin limits our capacity to receive the blessings God desires to give to us.

Israel, rather than accepting its high calling to receive God’s blessing and take the Promised Land, refuses to receive the greatness of its calling. This is not an act of humility, but of distrust, failure in faith and love, and ultimately despair. When God calls us to something, He will not leave us to our own strength. We must believe that he will give us the strength to succeed in what he asks us to achieve. Israel could not defeat the Canaanites on its own power, but they fail to allow God to be with them and to deliver the Promised Land into their hands. The lesson for us is that when God asks us to do something He will give us the strength to accomplish it – He does not leave us alone – if we keep our faith in his fidelity.

For Israel, their lack of trust manifested itself in an explicit rejection of God’s call for them. For us, however, we may not directly reject God’s call but we can still fail in faith. When we fail to pursue the great calling to holiness and witness to the faith, whether it be in a public setting or just within our family, we fail to trust that God will empower us to live in imitation of Christ. It is not the virtue of humility to minimize God’s call in our lives. Humility is to see things as they truly are, and our faith tells us that God gives us His strength to do that which is beyond our natural capacity. To say God calls other people to great holiness and not ourselves is to succumb at some level to despair. Why is it that many people even within the Church do not truly pursue holiness? It is because they despair that it is possible for them. Despair is to say something is not attainable.²³³ Just like the Israelites, we think God will not walk with us toward that which seems impossible. But this is not the life God calls us to. We are called to hope. Hope is to have confidence that God will give us strength to fulfill our mission.²³⁴

²³³ see CCC, #2091

²³⁴ CCC, #2090

Conversely, it is the sin of presumption to think we have already reached a state in which God is completely pleased with us and there is no need to improve, or we become indifferent to pursuing holiness. The loss of hope results in a failure to seek holiness and it manifests itself in two ways: despair, this is impossible; or presumption, I am a good person, God loves, I have no need to improve. Both despair and presumption have the same result – a failure to pursue holiness. We can also fall into presumption by expecting that God will give us His gift without our cooperation through prayer and meditation, the sacramental life, the effort to live Christian morality and the constant effort to put others before ourselves.²³⁵ Yes, God wants to give us the life of grace, but He also respects our freedom, so we must work to cooperate with the Holy Spirit to respond to God’s call in our lives.

Another manifestation of despair especially visible today is a sorrow that comes from being confronted with a great noble task, particularly the heroic work of making ourselves saints, and yet lacking the courage and will to pursue it because it is too hard. Saint Thomas Aquinas calls this condition *acedia*. He defines it as “sadness in the face of some spiritual good which one has to achieve.”²³⁶ That is, *acedia* is a spirit of hopelessness in the pursuit of good because the good to be pursued is difficult to obtain. So often we do not pursue holiness because we do not want to do the difficult work it takes. This is more than laziness. It is at its root a rejection of God’s plan in our lives – a rejection of God. Because we do not want to do the work of holiness we distract ourselves with entertainment or other less worthy endeavors. We allow ourselves to be less than we were created to be. In fact, it can at times lead us to disparage the very thing that we know to be good. As a defense mechanism it is tempting to tear down the very thing we should pursue out of despair of ever obtaining it. It is a great tragedy when this happens but the truth is that it happens quite frequently.

The best remedy to *acedia* is to develop magnanimity, the generous gift of self for great things, primarily the sanctification of ourselves and the world.²³⁷ The perfection of our souls and the sanctification of the world around us is the greatest work a person can do. Like Moses, we must allow ourselves to be formed in the school of faith that stretches the soul beyond our natural limitations and allow God to act through us. We should not despair that this is not possible. God’s grace is there for us if we respond. True humility recognizes our own human limitations but turns to God in confidence and trust. As Saint Paul says, “God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your strength, but with the temptation will also prove the way of escape, that you may be able to endure.”²³⁸ This is what the life of virtue is about. We acquire, through grace, the good habits of self-control that move us to prayer, chastity, faith, and all the virtues that are in the imitation of Christ. Through the infusion of these gifts, united with grace, we are able to offer ourselves in a magnanimous spirit to the witness of God’s faithful love as did Caleb and Joshua. It may seem impossible, but God is with us to give us the power to win the battle over sin. The difficulty of the task is the very thing that illuminates God’s love and

²³⁵ CCC, #2092

²³⁶ Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II, Q. 35

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, II-II, Q. 129

²³⁸ 1 Corinthians 10:13

power. Without trials it would be easy to lose sight of God, which would be the greatest tragedy of all.

There are three practical things that can be done to help fight the vice of *acedia* and develop *magnanimity*. First, never forget the true nobility each of us has as sons and daughters of God.²³⁹ Second, remember by whose power we achieve holiness. It is God who works in us; we are not left on our own to find our goal. Finally, offer sacrifices for the purpose of our own perfection. To do the right thing is frequently a painful thing, and it is best to build the capacity to make sacrifices through small acts of mortification each day so when the time comes to do more difficult sacrifices, the soul will have developed a capacity that it would not otherwise have. Once the soul learns to live with an eye to the greatness of our calling, we then live with hope that God will walk with us through the difficulties of life. It is with hope, then, that the Christian lives in confidence that God will be with him or her.

²³⁹ The lives of the saints are a good meditation for this, or there are many passages from the Scriptures. Here are a few selections that would make for good meditation: Psalm 8, 139; Isaiah 43; Romans 8:14-17, 26-27; Ephesians 1:3-14