

Torah Portion: Numbers 13:1-15:41

Haftarah Portion: Joshua 2:1-24

Brit Chadashah Portion: Hebrews 3:7-4:11

I am going to be preaching this week from the three Scripture portions because the failure of the Spies and the: “yes, but” spirituality they practiced is still a very real danger for us in our days. They had seen the wonders of G-d and had experienced both His provision and His protection and if they had trusted Him to lead them into the Promised Land, there would not have been a lost generation. G-d is infinitely more stubborn than we are and He will not budge from His principles. So come with me as we examine one of the saddest events in our people's history. We can learn from both good events and bad examples in the Scriptures.

Let me begin with an explanation of the names of the various camping sites. Numbers 33 gives a complete list of all their camping sites, but many of the names are not the same as the ones that were used earlier in the account. The launching campsite has three names. It is first just called the wilderness of Paran, then it is called Kadesh in the wilderness of Paran and finally, in the complete list, in Numbers 33, it is called Rithmah.

Names change for a number of reasons. Some place names may have initially been Egyptian or Canaanite and were changed into Hebrew, when Israel took over the land. This is just another testimony to the truth and accuracy of the Scriptures. Both the older and the newer names are given so that we know where all the action takes place and that this action took place in time and space and not in the never never land of someone's imagination.

Moses selects twelve spies from among the leaders of each tribe and they were men of good reputation. He chose no spies from the tribe of Levi and he chose one leader from Ephraim and one from Manasseh. We need to be careful because a good reputation is not always an indicator of success or reliability. Under pressure and in the face of opposition some previously reliable leaders cave and abandon the truth they once held.

The spies' mandate was to explore Canaan and to report on conditions in the land. Such things as fertility, fortifications and what the inhabitants were like. They were gone for some forty days and they saw that the land was incredibly fertile, but that many of the inhabitants were giants of great stature. Ten of the spies were intimidated by what they saw.

We should never allow anything which comes our way to intimidate or cause us to doubt the protection and provision of G-d. G-d promised Israel that He would sweep away all the opposition which the people encountered, and a generation later, He did just that. He sent the spies so that the people would know what they were up against. Despite the misgivings of ten of the spies, they used a literary device to describe the abundance they saw in the Holy Land. They said it was a land which flowed with milk and honey. They agree, yes, but, they also had misgivings. Never let your misgivings get in the way of your confidence in G-d.

Ten of the spies violated their mandate and went further and said that the job was impossible. They used two negative descriptions to discourage the people and to dissuade them from entering Canaan. First they said the land devours its people and then that the House of Israel would be as grasshoppers before the people who lived in Canaan.

Let me give you a brief history of Canaan before the conquest by the House of Israel. Canaan was a collection of fertile plains and rugged hills that sometimes rose up to become mountains. Whenever a new set of invaders arrived, they drove the current inhabitants off the fertile plains and into the mountains, where the survivors built great fortresses which were too strong to be easily taken.

These survivors raised whatever crops they could and took refuge in their fortresses whenever they were attacked. Canaan was a patchwork of valley dwelling conquerors and hill dwelling survivors. This is what it means when the ten spies said that the land devours its inhabitants. In the conquest of Canaan, the House of Israel would first have to face the large and ferocious valley dwellers and then, if successful, they would have to dislodge hill dwellers, which the ten spies considered too well fortified to tackle, even with the help of the L-RD. There is nothing too hard to tackle with the help of the L-RD?

Always be careful about the kind of self talk you generate as you consider the tasks which the L-RD calls all believers to tackle and to overcome. You can, all too easily, talk yourself into cowardness and defeat, or you can bring your fears to the L-RD and let Him show you how to demolish them. Sometimes this demolishing may take a long time – it was only in the time of David that the last major Canaanite fortress, Jerusalem, was finally taken and that the troublesome Philistines were finally subdued.

We all have giant filled valleys to conquer and heavily fortified hills to overcome, but instead of letting our hearts and minds become so clogged in fear that we want to flee in carnal panic, we need to learn to trust G-d for any amount of the good, the bad and the ugly which wanders through our lives. For, indeed, greater is He who is in you, than the one who is in the world.

We do indeed live in a darkening, dangerous world and the enemy is escalating his roaring rampage, forever seeking new victims to devour. As well, a biblically based expression of faith is increasingly being relegated to the lunatic fringes of our society. And more and more, we are also being portrayed either as mindless fanatics or as unstable victims of brainwashing, ruled over by cruel charlatans who are after our money, our minds and even our bodies.

Those believers who follow biblically based spirituality are increasingly being portrayed as spiritual perverts. At the same time, our society protects sexual perverts, as we, the supposed spiritual perverts come under frequent attacks, because we refuse to cave into the tyranny of political correctness or the cruel fascism of evolutionary humanism.

The ten spies let the obstacles which they encountered, talk them out of their confidence in the mighty power of G-d and their faith in the promises of G-d. Instead of risking defeat at the hands of their Canaanite enemies, they beat themselves up. They wanted to run away from their fears before they ever encountered the enemy. They were trying to talk the people out of believing in the promises of G-d. But you see, G-d never promised them that they would be delivered out of experiencing trials, He did promise them that they would be delivered through their trials. How you look at whatever trials come your way and how you respond to them, will always have a greater impact on your spirituality, than the actual trials themselves.

The ten freakaholics began a campaign to turn the people against Moses and his supporters. Unfortunately, they were quite successful and the people wept all night and refused to listen to Caleb or Joshua – or anyone else who spoke up in favour of trusting the L-rd and obeying His call to proceed with the Conquest of Canaan. Be careful and never refuse to listen to G-d.

They only suggested two solutions for their fear and lack of trust in the promises of G-d. They either wanted to turn back and die in the wilderness, or select a new leader and return to Egypt and the relative security of Egyptian slavery. With so many voices clamouring for our attention, we need to sift through them and discern the will of G-d and not be duped into following any leader who speaks against the promises of G-d. Beware of modern freakaholics! The sky is not falling, but the L-rd is coming back one day!

In our world today, there are too many who preach panic and fear because they say, the bad times they are a coming. This kind of defeatist, self preservation teaching troubles me. I would not head for the hills and go into hiding unless the L-rd clearly and directed me to do so, or if my enemies were actually on my tail! You see, you can try hiding in the hills and living off the land, but the enemy will still find you. And you will bring all your heart baggage of brokenness and unresolved issues with you, because the only way this will ever go away is when you are made whole and all your unresolved issues are solved and resolved.

Midway through the 1800's and early 1900's, there was a christian missionary by the name of C.T. Stud who composed a poem/epigram that continues to impact the way I look at outreach and at the biblical spiritual priorities which should govern my life:

“Some want to live within the sound of church and chapel bell,
I want to run a rescue shop, within a yard of Hell.”

The L-rd, through His Word and by His Spirit, should be the only comfort zone we live in. Not all of us are called to go to the ends of the earth (but considering where I was born, Canada is the ends of the earth), but all of us are called to be salt and light as we walk with our Messiah through this fading world on our pilgrimage to our Father's home in glory. Wherever the Messiah wants to take me, that is where I want to go and where I want to live.

Back in the staging camp at Kadesh, the defeatists won the day and were actually setting in motion their “about face” retreat to head back to Egypt. The two faithful spies, along with Moses, Aaron and probably the Levites, never stopped promoting the people's entry into Canaan, but to no avail. They refused to see that when the L-rd is with us, nothing can stand in His way. But the people refuse to listen to good spiritual advice and get prepared to stone all those who persisted in promoting G-d's agenda. Some people still do this today!

We are not told directly what the Levites were doing through all of this, but it is my guess that they were forming up around Moses, Aaron and the spies, to protect them, if it came to a fight. Before things got completely out of hand, the glory of G-d came out of the Holy of Holies and hovered over the tent of meeting. The startled people backed off and Moses was called into the tabernacle, behind the veil. The voice of G-d is never drowned out any noisy opposition.

YHVH expressed dismay and dissatisfaction because of the people's stubborn defeatism, which He said was the same as despising Him and failing to believe Him or trust in His promises. And this, despite all the signs and miracles He already performed for them, both in Egypt and in the wilderness. G-d is bigger than all the problems in the universe, combined.

He instructed Moses to stand out of the way, because He was going to strike down the rebels with a lethal plague and rebuild a greater, more powerful nation out of Moses and his supporters. What YHVH really wants to determine is where Moses and his supporters stood in all of this turmoil. Were they on His side or were they beginning to weaken?

Moses launches into a two pronged intercession on behalf of the foolish people. First he says that if the L-rd exterminated the people, the inhabitants of Canaan would say that the L-rd was not powerful enough to bring the House of Israel into the land. Again, the L-rd was not at all concerned with His reputation among the Canaanites, He just wanted to be sure that Moses had not lost his confidence in YHVH. How is your confidence in the L-RD doing?

Moses goes on to invoke a portion of the longer declaration of the sacred name and asks that YHVH would again be merciful and forgive the people as He has already repeatedly done, since they left Egypt. Moses' intercession was successful with a caveat. Because the Exodus generation had tempted G-d repeatedly (figuratively called ten times) ever since Egypt, none of these rebels would ever be allowed to enter the Promised Land.

They are told to turn around and to head back towards the Red Sea. Because they said that they wanted to die in the wilderness, they got what they asked for and now, they were going to wander through it, until all the fighting men over the age of twenty perished. This number did not include Caleb and Joshua or the Levites who were on the L-RD's side. Since they had spent some forty days wandering through Canaan, they would now spend some forty years wandering as wilderness nomads and never be allowed to enter Canaan.

It was a just punishment for the horrible way they treated YHVH and His promises, however, the L-rd spared the women and children. The unbelieving spies were then struck down with a fatal plague. They were the first of an entire generation who would also drop dead in the wilderness, because they refused to listen to G-d and enter the Promised Land.

When the people heard the divine sentence, they repented, not because they regretted their rebellion, but because they wanted to avoid the punishment. On the Day of Judgment, everyone will want to repent to avoid their eternal punishment, but even then, it will also be too late. There are no second chances. Authentic spiritual repentance, radically regrets sin and wants nothing more to do with it (2 Corin. 7:11). Carnal repentance merely seeks to escape punishment, like the rebels did. A reluctant to repentance never pleases our G-d.

Rather than die in the wilderness, they are now prepared to charge into Canaan. Moses warned them not to be so foolish, because neither he nor the ark would go ahead of them and they would be on their own. For a second time they did not listen and they initiated an attack on Canaan and so that G-d would have to rescue them. He did not. He never rescues unrepentant rebels. They were cut to ribbons and chased back to the camp and to the safety of the fiery cloud. Their attackers did not follow them into the camp, because they were likely afraid of the hovering fiery cloud which had caused all of Israel's enemies so much trouble. The House of Israel then reluctantly, makes preparations to return to the wilderness.

Too many believers live in a personal spiritual wilderness of brokenness, unresolved issues and disobedience and they have no victory in their lives. The Messiah never wants us to hide from our problems, He wants us to confront them and deal with them according to His Word and His Spirit. Sometimes, it may take until the next life before we see final victory in every area of our lives, but we need to let Him lead us through all the whatever's which trouble our lives, so that we avoid carnal defeat in all and any areas of our lives. Is this what you want?

Before the portion ends, YHVH does not waste any more time on the punishment of the rebels, but continues to give instructions regarding sacrifices, including an atonement offering for involuntary sin. Our spirituality is always more important than anything else in our lives.

While this instruction is going on and while the people are still reeling from their forty years of wandering sentence, another form of rebellion tries to creep into the camp. An unnamed man violated the Sabbath by gathering wood on the day of rest. He may have felt that since the people were not going to go into the land, why should they keep any of the commandments? He was wrong and he was stoned. For the entirety of their wandering, they had to keep the commandments so that none of the bad habits of the Exodus generation would be allowed to defile the next generation who would be entering Canaan. We are never allowed to get slack in the L-rd, because He is L-rd of everything which happens in our lives, as well as of everything which does not happen in our lives. Is He L-rd of everything in your life?

Next, our people are instructed to make and wear fringes at the edges of their garments so that they would always remember all the commandments and not be influenced to break any of them. They stand as a symbolic reminder to always remember the commandments and to always put them into practice. We are never to follow the negative example of the rebellious Exodus generation. We are always to listen and to obey the voice of G-d. Are you listening?

We will learn in a later portion that there were still two more rebellions before the disgraced Exodus generation begins its wilderness wandering. When I look at the wonderful promises of G-d, to the Jew first and also to the Gentile, I am greatly encouraged because He has empowered us to cast down fortresses and defeat any spiritual foe who tries to knock down the house of our faith or who tries to steal the seed of our faith or wither it with temptation or choke it with the weeds of this life. Then I consider the condition of far too many believers who claim to walk with the L-rd, but who are trapped in negative behavior patterns. So sad.

They seem determined not to bring their brokenness to the Messiah and do not want Him to help them to deal with unwanted personal baggage. They have any number of invalid excuses why things are not really working out for them in the L-rd. They have a lot of blame to hand out as they wallow in the works of the flesh and actually want us to believe that they are walking with the L-rd as they lurk in the shadows, full of rage and bitterness. This is because somebody “done them wrong” and they say that if we only knew what they have been through, we would agree they are right to feel the way they do and act they way they do.

When they speak, I hear the fault finding voice of the Exodus generation who want to cling to excuses, rather than to seek solutions in our Messiah. They fail to realize that whatever the Messiah does not deliver us from, He gives us victory over, as we learn to forgive those who have hurt us (and as we seek forgiveness from those we have hurt). May all of us in our community fill our hearts and lives with faithful obedience and healing forgiveness, so that we do not waste our lives wandering through any number of personal wildernesses. We will pick up the final episode of their folly in the next Torah portion. Remember, G-d is not mocked and His steadfast love is greater than the sum total of human folly – which is why He sent our beloved Messiah. We need to learn to see things from G-d's perspective.

The Haftarah portion covers most of Joshua chapter two and deals with the two spies who are charged with scouting out the land for the new generation. They are to cover the same territory as the 12 spies, with special emphasis on Jericho, one of Canaan's most heavily fortified cities that was near the site of their future crossing. It is the strongest fortress in Canaan and to date had never been taken. They arrive in Jericho, likely at the end of their mission and seek shelter in the house of Rahab. Her home was not a house of ill repute, but she did work as a temple prostitute in one of Jericho's pagan temples.

She had probably been performing ritual sex from an early age, but she was a respected citizen and ran a kind of inn for visitors. She hides the spies on her roof under some talks of linen and sends those who are looking them on a wild goose chase outside the city walls. She then tells the spies how a great terror has struck the land, because the people know that Canaan has been given to the House of Israel. They know the story of the crossing of the Reed Sea and of the total annihilation of Sihon and Og, the most powerful newcomers in the land. They did not see Israel as grasshoppers, but as the next conquerors of the land.

The Canaanites knew that they were doomed, especially the giants in the valleys. A fortress like Jericho might survive, but it would be surrounded by another fresh group of hostile invaders and the leaders of the city may have wished to torture the spies and discover Israel's plan of attack. There will always be resistance to the purposes of G-d, but it is always futile.

Rahab makes a deal to save herself and her extended family. Right after the spies left, she was to attach a scarlet thread outside her window, which was on the wall. But when the walls came down, wouldn't her house have collapsed with it? Archaeologists have discovered that Jericho had two walls. The outer wall was wide enough for a chariot to turn around on comfortably and was gently sloping to make maneuvering very easy. Once the enemy had breached the outer wall, chariots would pour out of the inner city and slaughter any attackers, before they reached the inner wall. No enemy had yet been able to resist their chariots.

When the outer walls eventually tumbled down, Israel was able to storm the inner walls and slaughter the stunned inhabitants who could no longer make effective use of their chariots. Rahab and her family joined Israel and she is one of the ancestors of our Messiah Yeshua. Sometimes our best sharing strategy is to speak about the wonderful deeds of G-d and then watch as interested seekers give their hearts to the L-RD.

The rebellious Exodus generation is also mentioned in the New Testament portion as those whose disbelief and rebellion disqualified from entering the Sabbath rest of G-d. The writer of Hebrews stipulates that there is an eternal Sabbath rest for faithful believers who do not slide into disobedience and rebellion. Nowhere in the Scriptures is there ever a Sunday rest mentioned. The Sabbath is our unique foretaste of Heaven and while the Exodus generation did not enter the L-rd's rest in the Holy Land, their eternal destiny will be revealed once the intentions of their hearts are disclosed on Judgment Day. Justice will be done.

No one gets a second chance when we stand before the Messiah on Judgment Day – just like the rebellious Exodus generation did not get a second chance to enter the Land, once they refused the first time. It is too late to repent on Judgment Day. Life is a series of challenges which we need to respond to by faith as we apply His Word to all the valleys and mountains which are trying to block our way, as we journey to our Father's Home in glory.

The straight and narrow is a bumpy path, filled with a series of snares of the enemy and other detours which come from the flesh and the world. Our faithful obedience will guide us as surely and as mightily as the fiery cloud guided our people to the Holy Land. As long as we follow His guidance, YHVH will make sure we make it safely home. If we rebel or cease to follow, we will gradually slip into a spiritual coma where the hay, the wood and the stubble of this life, will eventually crowd out a more precious cargo of gold, silver and precious jewels. We may still be saved, as the fire of the Day of Judgment consumes all the foolish things which we have allowed to clog our hearts and lives with. We are not allowed to bring our folly with us into the next life. How is your packing for the next life doing?

The most important perspective that we need to be in possession of is that His grace is always sufficient for us, because He will never leave us nor forsake us. Faith without works cannot save us, nor can the dead works people practice to somehow try and earn their salvation. Faith which produces works is the surest sign that the power of everlasting life is at work in us, as we walk according to His Word, filled with His Spirit. What is your heart and life filled with? Faith without works is dead. How is your faith doing? How are your works doing?

It is not a sin to have doubts or to be troubled by issues in our lives that we are trying to work out. It is only when sin causes us to lose confidence in YHVH's ability to guide us through the whatever's of life and bring us safely to His eternal Home, that we are in serious spiritual trouble. This darkening world is on the verge of melting away on the Day when our Messiah returns and everything which is not worthy of His Kingdom will also be consumed. Everything.

The rebellious Exodus generation stumbled and was forgiven. But when as a group, they refused to obey their calling to enter the Promised Land, they were sent back into the wilderness, where they died. Their children and grandchildren were the ones who entered the Holy Land, but were also warned of the dire consequences of disobedience and disbelief.

In a way, we face the same challenge. In my 48 years as a believer I have seen scores of people come to faith and I watched as too many of them slipped away into doubt and into temptation. Others hung around for a while until the cares, the riches and the pleasure of this life, choked any viable spirituality out of them. Others became like camp followers, prowling around the edge of the camp trying to sow the seeds of the carnal works of the flesh in the midst of believers and their communities. Spiritual misery always loves company.

Some come to faith and reach a crisis point where they have to let go of carnal baggage and learn new habits and strategies to deal with their brokenness and all the carnal darkness they brought with them into the faith. Many of these temporary pilgrims have learned enough spiritual terminology to express their carnal problems in spiritual sounding language, when in fact they keep on sprouting the works of the flesh instead of growing the fruit of the Spirit.

G-d responds to true repentance, which is horrified when sin is pointed out and sincerely wants to seek for forgiveness and set straight paths before their feet. Repentance which merely seeks to avoid punishment, and which is not really sorry for what has been done is carnal repentance. Which kind of repentance do you want to fill your life with?

G-d is both merciful and also holds us to a non negotiable high standard of faith and obedience. He is not the one who needs to change. He wants to change us and help us to sift through the contents of our hearts and lives, so that we do not fall into the disobedience and the disbelief of the Exodus generation. He wants to help us avoid spiritual loss.

We are going to be accountable for what we give our hearts to and for which influences we allow to guide us on our journey through this life to our home in Glory. What comes into our lives will always have a biblical reaction which G-d wants us to adopt and integrate into our lives. We need to learn not to snatch defeat out of the jaws of victory. What are you sowing in your life? As we come to full summer, may we come to faithful obedience, so that we may reap the victory the L-rd holds in store for each of us and for all of us.

Shabbat Shalom and Shavua Tov.