

INTRODUCTION

So close, but not close enough. You have that feeling before. You went to Walmart on Black Friday. There were people everywhere. You saw someone backing out from a super rare parking space. You accelerated and zipped over there just to find that another car arrived before you. Perhaps you attended a company banquet. There was a prize-drawing at the end. Your raffle ticket matched four and even five numbers, but not all six of them. You did not win anything. So close, but not close enough. Or it can be in sports competition where the difference is often a few hundredths of a second. A few weeks ago, an Ethiopian runner participated in a 3,000-meter race in Switzerland. He won the gold medal – at least he thought so. This athlete dashed through the finish line with joy of victory. When he walked toward the spectators, he noticed that all the other competitors ran past him. There was one more lap to go. Ops! It was too late when he tried to catch up. Eventually, he finished in the 10th place. This participant is far from a rookie. He won the bronze medal in the same event at the 2016 Summer Olympics. He is also a two-time world champion. This inexcusable mistake is a huge embarrassment to him and his country. So close, but not close enough. Cantonese have an expression for that. It is called “when the chickens of the Dan family see water.” Dan people are fishermen living in the Canton province. They live on boats most of their lives. They raise chickens so that people will not get tired of eating fish. The chickens look at the sea water but they cannot drink it. The idiom is to describe something you can almost reach it but you cannot get it. In Numbers chapter 13, the Israelites were so close to Canaan. It is in today's Israel, although the area is much smaller than the Biblical time. The people could even smell victory. But they were not close enough. They could not enter the Promised Land because they did not have faith in God. They saw problems and they were afraid. What is God asking you to do today? Do not just get close to the goal, but finish the race too. We shall learn in today's story that stepping out in faith is the only way to realize God's promises. We will look at three stages of the story – research, report and response.

EXPLANTION

1. 調查 Research

The Israelites were now at the doorstep of Canaan. God asked them to send some representatives to research the land. Listen to God's order again in **verse 2**: “Send some men to explore the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the Israelites. From each ancestral tribe send one of its leaders.” They had to go around and research the land. Each of the twelve tribes of Israel should send a representative. God specified that those people had to be leaders. It means that people would trust their report, and they should lead people to follow God's instructions. What did they have to look at? Read verses 18 to 20. We can use three “P” words to summarize their assignments. First, they had to check out the local People to see if they were strong or weak, and many or only a few. Second, they had to survey the Place to know if the inhabitants lived in fortified cities. Third, they had to examine the Produce. Was the place fertile to grow crops? God also told them to bring back a sample of the fruits. Their route is laid out in verses 21 to 23. From the map on the screen you can get an idea of their major stops from the south to the north. Why did God ask

them to do a research? It is just like the U.S. Army sends surveillance teams to Afghanistan or Iraq. A troop has to collect intelligence before any action. The Israelites would engage in future battles. They were not occupying Antarctica where hardly anyone lives there. The Canaanites would not be like: “No problem. I will let you guys take over. Just give us a week and we will pack and leave.” Of course not! The Canaan people would defend their homeland. Would the Israelites win? Let us go back to verse 2 and pay attention to a few words. About this Promised Land, God said: “I am giving to the Israelites.” If God said so, then it is a done deal! See the point here? The Israelites had to pay effort to achieve God’s promise. There would be battles and possibly casualties before a final victory. The information the twelve spies collected would mentally prepare the people for the difficulties ahead. You see, faith in God does not mean we do not need any planning. You cannot just sit there and wait for a diploma, a job or a future spouse to drop down from the sky. Do your research and get busy working toward your goals! For example, you have to do some math before you plan to get married. Can you and your future spouse make a living? A recent report ranks the most expensive city to live in the world. Can you guess the place? It is my birthplace – Hong Kong. (Many of you know there are some recent instabilities in that city. Please do remember the place in your prayer.) While most living expenses in Hong Kong like food and clothing are decent, home is a very expensive item. If you own an apartment in a high-rise building, you are already a multi-millionaire (that is in Hong Kong dollars). I know a couple from my previous home church. They could not get married simply because they could not afford to buy an apartment. And that was 30 years ago! I hope that they are living happily ever after now. Calculating the cost should be part of our planning. Jesus said the same thing in [Luke 14:26-27](#) – 26 “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters – yes, even his own life – he cannot be my disciple. 27 And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.” Jesus told us the price we need to pay to follow Him. To be a disciple of Jesus means becoming a Christian. For sure Jesus did not ask us to forsake our family and commit suicide before we can become a believer. The Bible commands us to honor our parents and to love others as ourselves. But we have to surrender ownership of all that we have for God. Jesus asked us to do our research, calculate the cost before we commit ourselves to Him. I have been a Christian long enough. I have seen too many people walking in and out of the church doors. When someone tells me: “So and so have received Christ,” I would not be too excited. I need to hear it for myself that the person has made a commitment to the Lord. Also, I need to help the person mature in the faith, and watch closely to see if he/she is actually growing. Then I can be confident to conclude that the person is truly saved. Therefore, you have to do some research first whether you want to become a Christian, propose to your girl-friend or make just about any plan for your future.

2. 匯報 Report

The representatives spent 40 days to complete their research. Then they came back and did a report. [Verse 23](#) describes how they took a sample of the fruit: When they reached the Valley of Eshcol, they cut off a branch bearing a single cluster of grapes. Two of them carried it on a pole between them, along with some pomegranates and figs. I do not know how you buy grapes from Aldi or Kroger. Two men carrying grapes on a pole? They must be as big as apples! Okay, that is an exaggeration. But it reflects that Canaan is truly a place of abundance. In fact, today the Israel Ministry of Tourism uses two men carrying a cluster of grapes as a logo. The spies continued their report in [verse 27](#): “We went into the land to which you sent us, and it does flow with milk

and honey! Here is its fruit.” Can you hear the “wow!” from the crowd? The phrase “flow with milk and honey” depicts the richness and fertility of the land. It would keep producing crops year after year. The twelve spies did not come up with the phrase. They remembered what God told Moses in **Exodus 3:8**: “So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey...” That was the reason why God took them out of Egypt. What God had promised their forefather Abraham 400 years ago would finally be fulfilled! The people must be very excited to hear the report. So far so good, until the spies made the next statement. Read **verse 28**: “But the people who live there are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large. We even saw descendants of Anak there.” Did the spies follow through their assignment? Do you still remember the 3P? They reported about the produce and brought back some samples. They described the places as big and fortified. They also stated that the local people were powerful. The Anak were a clan of giants. We shall talk more about them in a moment. We can conclude that the spies had been faithful to do their research. However, there is a problem in how they presented their report. In verse 28, they began with the conjunction “but.” They implied: “The place can’t be better BUT we don’t think we can get it.” The prize was good but the price was too high to pay. Going back to my previous example. It is like a guy in Hong Kong meets his dream lover. He says to himself: “I truly think that she will be a great wife BUT how can I afford an engagement ring with all the rocks? How can I afford to find a place to live?” Or perhaps a student may think: “How I wish to go to that college? BUT I can never get an SAT score high enough to beat other applicants. Even if I can get in, how can my parents pay the tuition for me to get out?” Or take our church as an example. Some coworkers may think that we need to do more outreach. They have some close relatives or long-time friends living in Memphis. They have a lot of Chinese colleagues at the UT medical research center or St. Jude’s Hospital. Some other coworkers believe we should start new ministries to help our existing members grow in their faith. At the same time, you will hear different voices: “We don’t have enough manpower. Those who are currently serving are maxed out already. We don’t have enough money. We need more facilities. Our church location isn’t ideal. The timing isn’t right.” Do you focus on the prize or the price? Do not take me wrong. I am not saying that we can beat our chest, sing “I Believe I Can Fly” and just do it. Our confidence is not in ourselves, but in the Lord. I said earlier that it is a Biblical thing to do some research first. We need to assess the needs and evaluate our resources objectively. Then based on those results we can do some wise planning. On the top of that, there is an important element that connects the prize and the price. We will soon find out.

3. 回應 Response

The twelve spies did their research and they presented a report. Next, we will look at their response. We will examine the negative response first. Ten of the twelve spies proposed: “Don’t even think about it.” Read **verse 31**: ... “We can’t attack those people; they are stronger than we are.” The spies could clearly see from a distance that some of the Canaanites were tall and strong. The ten spies continued their analysis in **verses 32-33**: 32 ... “The land we explored devours those living in it. All the people we saw there are of great size. 33 We saw the Nephilim there (the descendants of Anak come from the Nephilim). We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them.” Those representatives were supposed to give an objective report of what they saw. But they added their subjective evaluation to it. Who were the Nephilim? According to Genesis chapter 6, they were some super tall legendary beings. Some

Bible scholars said the description of Nephilim may be an exaggerated imagination of the spies. It is like when we hear the word “King Kong” or “Godzilla,” you immediately picture an invincible creature in your mind. Also, notice their use of words “devours” and “grasshoppers” to exaggerate the problems they might face. The result was fear. The ten spies persuaded the rest of the people not to go to Canaan. When people are overcome by fear, they will assume the worst outcome. The Israelites could think of many “what-ifs” in their mind. For example: “What if those giants stomp us under their feet? What if they capture us for barbeque? What if tens of thousands of our people perish?” All twelve spies made the same observations but they came to contrasting interpretations and conclusions. Of all the spies, only two men stood up to encourage their fellow Israelites. Other people focused on the price while Caleb and Joshua focused on the prize. Caleb spoke out in this chapter, and Joshua joined him in chapter 14. Look at **verse 30**: Then Caleb silenced the people before Moses and said, “We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it.” Caleb encouraged the people: “Listen guys, come on, let’s go!” The two leaders went on to cheer people up in **14:8** – “If the Lord is pleased with us, he will lead us into that land...” Caleb and Joshua were far from being naïve. Most likely some Israelites would die in battles. It might take months and years to defeat the Canaanites. The key is: “If the Lord is pleased with us.” Since God said so and if He was delighted to have us – this generation of Israelites – occupy Canaan, then we would eventually get the land. They knew what connects prize and price is God’s promise. We see a hint in our story reminding us of God’s promise to Israel. It is mentioned in verse 22 that in their research, the spies would pass through the city of Hebron. It is the very city where Abraham purchased a piece of land from the local people as a grave site for his wife Sarah. In fact, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, all three generations of the Israel forefathers were subsequently buried in the same tomb. Although I do not have any Biblical proof, it was likely that when the spies went to Hebron, they would recall the history. They might say to one another: “Oh yeah, I remember what my grandparents and parents told me about Hebron. Wow, this is the place God had promised to us.” Even the local people at Hebron should know that the tomb belonged to a foreigner named Abraham. God had essentially made a deposit for Israel. Now, they had to go in and take possession of the land. They had two choices. Caleb and Joshua said: “Come on, let’s go!” The other ten spies disagreed: “Don’t even think about it.” What is your response when you face a hurdle in your plan? You can terminate the plan, thinking that it is not worth the trouble. Or you can leap over it by faith. You may wonder: “How can I be so sure that it is God’s plan for me to take that job offer, relocate to another city or marry that person?” My quick answer for you is that God’s plan cannot contradict His general will in the Bible. Once a mentor said something quite helpful to me: God allows us to anything, except sinning. Any decision you make in life should result in a closer relationship with the Lord. You grow in your knowledge of Him and faith in Him. Your heart should be filled with joy. Just like Caleb and Joshua did, you pray to God: “Lord, if it pleases You, then I will go do it.”

CONCLUSION

We learn from the story today that stepping out in faith is the only way to realize God’s promises. What is God asking you to do today? What is God asking our church to do today? Indeed, there will be challenges. But hold on to God’s promises in the Bible. He tells us that He will never leave us. He will show us the way if we seek Him. He will increase our strength if we ask Him. There are many other precious promises in God’s Word. We need to read them and memorize them. But most importantly, we have to ask God to give a bigger faith to realize them.