

INTRODUCTION

Let me recap the story in chapter 13 we studied two weeks ago. The Israelites were in the wilderness. They were ready to march into the Promised Land that God had reserved for them. God asked His people to send 12 spies to survey the land. They came back with some king-size grapes and other fruits. They reported that Canaan was truly a land flowing with milk and honey. Among the twelve representatives, Caleb and Joshua said: “Brothers, come on, let’s go and seize the place!” But the rest of the 10 spies disagreed: “Don’t even think about it! Our enemies are numerous. They are huge like Yao Ming. We look like grasshoppers to them. Their cities are fortified. We can’t win.” It was four people versus two million at that town hall meeting. Caleb, Joshua, Moses and Aaron were the minority. They were motivated by the prize. But the rest of the people were mortified by the price. Whose voice would prevail? It is natural to have insecurity about the future. We wonder if we have the resources, talents and opportunities to accomplish our goals. How can we gather the confidence to leap forward? Let us learn from today’s passage that: Fear looks ahead to the future hardship and backs off. But faith looks back at God’s grace then steps forward.

EXPLANATION

1. 拒絕神的帶領 Reject God’s Leadership

The Israelites did not have faith that God would help them conquer Canaan. The spiritual problem was that they rejected God’s leadership. They grumbled just like how they reacted to the previous hardships. Look at **verses 2-3**: 2 ... “If only we had died in Egypt! Or in this desert! 3 Why is the Lord bringing us to this land only to let us fall by the sword? Our wives and children will be taken as plunder. Wouldn’t it be better for us to go back to Egypt?” Who told them that the men would die and their wives and children would be captured? Those are their imagination. Fear drove them to exaggerate the worst outcome. The Israelites concluded that they had better go back to Egypt and remained as slaves forever. Thus, they made a proposal in the **next verse**: And they said to each other, “We should choose a leader and go back to Egypt.” They wanted to fire Moses and pick someone else to lead them. They thought: “Why listen to Moses? We didn’t have any good day since we left Egypt. We see nothing but desert and rocks. The heat is killing us. We don’t know where to find water. There is nothing to eat but manna. Now Moses asks us to trust the Lord and fight the Canaanites? Forget about it!” The people did not only reject Moses, they also rejected God who appointed Moses. If we do not trust God’s leadership, we will follow something else. Jesus said in **Matthew 6:24** – “No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.” It is that clear-cut. A person will only follow Jesus or follow the world. Why are money and materialism so attractive? Those are something solid that people can hold in their hands. The world fools us into believing that when we have money, we can have everything. Thus, people believe in themselves. Some people wonder: “Why are you Christians so narrow-minded and say Jesus is the only way to salvation? Every road leads to Rome. There has to be some other ways.” The question is, who has the right to decide how to be

saved? Only God can! If you think that there are alternatives like good works, rituals or other religions, then you must have some insider info that even God does not know. When people do not like God's leadership, they will pick and choose what they like to hear. Even some self-proclaimed Christians are like that. Paul warned us in **2 Timothy 4:3-4**: 3 For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. 4 They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. Paul described the situation 2,000 years ago. Is it any different today? No, except that it only gets worse. When people get tired about learning the Bible, they will look for some other teachings. We live in a rural place called Memphis. Most churches are still fairly conservative, meaning that they are faithful to the Bible. There is nothing wrong to come up with creative ideas to teach the Bible. But we should be careful in defining what constitutes a good message. There are some speakers going around and preach human psychology or humor. You need to see if what they say has any Biblical basis. We should follow God's leadership, not the philosophy of some so-called experts. The world is changing but the Biblical messages must remain the same. For example, we should not be shy to talk about sin, death and the cross. Salvation is not about getting an entry pass to heaven. To be a Christian is to be a follower of Christ. There will be blessings, but there will also be sacrifice and suffering. We receive Jesus as our Lord and we live for His glory. Brothers and sisters: we have to watch out. Any time we reject God's leadership we may want to go back to our Egypt. Allow me to spiritualize it a little bit. Our Egypt is the sinful lifestyle we had before we became Christians. It was when we were still a slave of sin, and we did not want God to rule over our life. We had no interest to go to church and we did not want to hear anything about the Bible. We crown ourselves as a little king or queen. If Jesus is not your Lord, then who is the boss?

2. 重申神的應許 Reiterate God's Promise

The majority of the Israelites did not have faith in God and so they rejected His leadership. In contrast, Caleb and Joshua were confident. In **verses 7-8** they reiterated God's promise to encourage their peers: 7 ... "The land we passed through and explored is exceedingly good. 8 If the Lord is pleased with us, he will lead us into that land, a land flowing with milk and honey, and will give it to us." They said: "Guys, here are the fruits we brought back. Canaan is really a land of abundance." "If the Lord is pleased with us, then it will be done." Caleb and Joshua continued to say in **verse 9**: "Only do not rebel against the Lord. And do not be afraid of the people of the land, because we will swallow them up. Their protection is gone, but the Lord is with us. Do not be afraid of them." The two leaders pointed out the core issue: "do not rebel against the Lord." Lacking in faith and the desire to go back to Egypt are signs of disobedience to the Lord. God was on their side. How did Caleb and Joshua know that? There is an interesting background from the ancient world. When two nations were at war, whoever won would prove that the deity behind that country was more powerful. We see an example in 1 Kings 20. Aram (another name for Syria) attacked Israel. Aram lost badly. The officials gave their analysis to their king in **verse 23**: ... "Their gods are gods of the hills. That is why they were too strong for us. But if we fight them on the plains, surely we will be stronger than they." It was common for nations who did not worship Jehovah to bow down to many idols. Aram thought that the "hill gods" of Israel could not protect their people on the plains. It is like you cannot use your Costco card to enter Sam's. You have to be a member in the right territory to enjoy the benefits. From a military standpoint, a possible reason for Aram's defeat was their gears. It was difficult for the

soldiers to maneuver their horses and chariots on rugged terrains. But human factor aside, Jehovah is the commander of air, land and sea. God responded to the Israel king in **verse 28**: ... ‘Because the Arameans think the Lord is a god of the hills and not a god of the valleys, I will deliver this vast army into your hands, and you will know that I am the Lord.’ The result was a resounding victory for Israel. God’s intent is the same to this day! When God answers your prayer and helps you resolve a problem, it proves that He is with you. Do not forget to give God all the glory! This time the Israelites did not have faith to go to Canaan. God rebuked them in **verse 11**: ... “How long will these people treat me with contempt? How long will they refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the miraculous signs I have performed among them?” How many miracles God had showed them? Plenty! The Ten Plagues, dividing of the Red Sea, gushing of water from the rock, falling of manna from the sky, etc. Even if they forgot about all that had happened in the past two years, they could look up to the sky. God was with them 24/7 with the pillars of cloud and fire. What other evidence did they still need? Their heart would be strengthened if they reflect on God’s blessings. We have to practice the same thing on a daily basis too. Keep counting God’s blessings, then you will not take His grace for granted. Every day I learn to give thanks to God when I open my eyes: “Lord, I am thankful that I can still wake up. I can see and I can breathe.” More than likely, I am the first person to sit at the breakfast table. While enjoying the quietness, I say to God: “Lord, I am thankful for this house. It may be the same coffee and bread I have every day. But I thank you for giving me food and an appetite to enjoy it.” You see, if you slow down your pace and examine on your life, there are a lot of things you can give thanks for. Besides your personal experience, you will be encouraged by reading others’ testimonies. In addition to all that, every Christian has a collection of God’s testimonies called the Bible we should read on a daily basis. The same God who was at work in the lives of many Biblical characters is also living in you. You can also recite some well-known passages or verses like Psalm 23. When you feel that your faith is running low, remember that the Lord is your shepherd. He will watch over you and He will lead you through difficult circumstances. In doing so, God’s promises will fill your heart. Fear will be replaced by faith.

3. 懇求神的憐憫 Request God’s Mercy

The Israelites rejected God’s leadership. But Caleb and Joshua encouraged people by reiterating God’s promise. But the people would not listen. Worse still, they were so mad that they wanted to throw stones at the two leaders to kill them. Just then the glory of God appeared to protect His servants. He told Moses that He intended to get rid of all His people in a plague. When God disciplines us, it is because of His holiness and righteousness. But when we do not get the punishment we deserve; it is out of God’s mercy. Now Moses requested God to show mercy to the rebellious people. There were two arguments in Moses’ petition. First, Moses appealed to God’s fame in front of the foreign nations. Look at **verses 15-16**: 15 “If you put these people to death all at one time, the nations who have heard this report about you will say, 16 ‘The Lord was not able to bring these people into the land he promised them on oath; so he slaughtered them in the desert.’” If you think about it, this is quite an interesting argument. The Egyptian got a heavy dose of God’s power. Their farmland was destroyed, and animals and many human lives perished in the Ten Plagues. Now if God could not take His people into Canaan, then it would become a big joke. God could not finish what He started. I was quite active in sports when I was younger. Once I participated in an 800-meter race in school. I was way ahead of the other competitors at first. I could hear the spectators cheering for me. After I used up most of my

energy in the first loop, I felt like dragging some big rocks in the second lap. I lost in the race. I learned my lesson: do not just get a good start, but I also have to finish well. Thankfully, God is not like me. He will complete what He begins. Besides appealing to God's fame among the nations, Moses also pleaded for God's faithfulness to His own people. Moses said in [verse 18](#): "The Lord is slow to anger, abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation." There are two sides of God's faithfulness. God is patient toward our disobedience. He is willing to forgive us when we sin. Those are the positive aspects of His faithfulness. But at the same time God is holy and just. He would deal with sinners as they deserve, even if it takes several generations. Moses continued His plea in [verse 19](#): "In accordance with your great love, forgive the sin of these people, just as you have pardoned them from the time they left Egypt until now." Moses knew that the Israelites were guilty as charged. They showed little faith in previous incidents. But God forgave His people every time. If God had to carry out His discipline this time, no one could accuse Him for being unfair. Therefore, Moses appealed to God's love. This Hebrew word for love – "hesed" – is commonly used in the Old Testament. It refers to God's covenantal loyalty. Nowadays, when you sign a contract for a cell-phone or a mortgage, it means that you accept the terms. If you miss a payment then the company can penalize you based on the regulations. In the same way, when God promised Abraham that his descendants would possess Canaan, then God had to fulfill His promise. Otherwise, Moses could sue God in a court. I am not being disrespectful in saying so. But you get the point. God's requirements for holiness and righteousness in His children have never changed. He has the right to discipline us when we sin. But God patiently waits for us to turn back from sin. A precious promise we are familiar with in [1 John 1:9](#) says: If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. We have to admit that we sin. God knows our hearts and there is no way to make up excuses, saying: "I'm only careless." Or "The devil tempted me to do it." We accept 100% of our responsibility. Just like Moses did, we request for God's mercy. In doing so, God promise to show His faithfulness to pardon us. God will forgive us because Jesus had suffered the penalty of our sins on the cross. All those who receive Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord are in the covenant of His blood. As such, next time when we sin we can come before the Heavenly Father to claim His forgiving grace through Jesus.

CONCLUSION

We learn from this passage that fear looks ahead to the future hardship and backs off. But faith looks back at God's grace then steps forward. What distinguishes Caleb and Joshua from the rest of the Israelites? They grew up together. They worked forced-labor together in Egypt. They experienced God's deliverance and His grace together. You see, faith in God is a choice. It is when we evaluate how God has been with us in the past, and we conclude that God is real and all that He said in the Bible is true. Then we continue to trust Him despite the unknowns ahead. There is a major difference between doubt and disbelief. When we are in doubt, we ask God: "Lord, I want to believe in you. Please increase my faith." But when we have disbelief, we say to ourselves: "I don't think God is trustworthy. It is safer to rely on my way." Christianity is about building an eternal relationship with our Lord. The more we commit ourselves to Him, the more we can experience His faithfulness. Brothers and sisters: which way do you prefer: your way or Yahweh?