

When Faith Fails...

THEOLOGICAL THEME: God punishes and redeems the faithless for the glory of His name.

Moments of decision come frequently in our lives, and the same was true of the people in the Bible. As our journey through the storyline of Scripture continues, we join the children of Israel as they come to the brink of the promised land, the first time. The God who promised to bring salvation to the world through the seed of Abraham has rescued Abraham's descendants from their slavery in Egypt. After a year in the wilderness, the Israelites have arrived at the doorstep to the land God promised. But before they enter, they are confronted with a decision that requires faith.

Voices from the Culture

"Faithless is he that says farewell when the road darkens."¹

—J. R. R. Tolkien (1892-1973)



When have you faced a decision that required faith? What helped or hindered your faith during that time?

In this session, we will study the story of the Israelites failing the test of faith as they were called to enter the promised land. In the example of the Israelites, we see what it looks like when we fail to have faith. When faith fails, we start looking at our strength instead of God's, and we forget the power God has demonstrated in the past as well as His future promise. When our faith fails, we need a faithful representative who will plead to God in our place. As you work through this session, ask the Spirit to examine your heart and grow your sense of gratitude for the greatness of God's faithfulness.

1. When faith fails, we start looking at our strength instead of God's (Num. 13:1-2,26-33).

¹ *The LORD spoke to Moses, saying,* ² *“Send men to spy out the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the people of Israel. From each tribe of their fathers you shall send a man, every one a chief among them.”*

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²⁶ *And they came to Moses and Aaron and to all the congregation of the people of Israel in the wilderness of Paran, at Kadesh. They brought back word to them and to all the congregation, and showed them the fruit of the land.* ²⁷ *And they told him, “We came to the land to which you sent us. It flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit.*

²⁸ *However, the people who dwell in the land are strong, and the cities are fortified and very large. And besides, we saw the descendants of Anak there.* ²⁹ *The Amalekites dwell in the land of the Negeb. The Hittites, the Jebusites, and the Amorites dwell in the hill country. And the Canaanites dwell by the sea, and along the Jordan.”*

³⁰ *But Caleb quieted the people before Moses and said, “Let us go up at once and occupy it, for we are well able to overcome it.”* ³¹ *Then the men who had gone up with him said, “We are not able to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we are.”*

³² *So they brought to the people of Israel a bad report of the land that they had spied out, saying, “The land, through which we have gone to spy it out, is a land that devours its inhabitants, and all the people that we saw in it are of great height.* ³³ *And there we saw the Nephilim (the sons of Anak, who come from the Nephilim), and we seemed to ourselves like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them.”*

List what the spies reported about the goodness of the land.	List what the spies reported about the obstacles to taking the land.

The spies had seen firsthand what they would have if the promise were fulfilled, but fear of the enemy caused them to lose their faith. They had let go of their identity as the people of God. They were the people of promise, saved by the one true God and commissioned to take the land God had for them. Instead, they looked at some really large soldiers and made a poor assessment of themselves, as if God were absent—“We seemed to ourselves like grasshoppers” (v. 33).

Only through faith in God and His work do we gain a true understanding of the world and ourselves. Because of Christ’s redemptive work on our behalf, our identity has changed. We are no longer an enemy, an outsider, a rebel, or lost in the darkness. Instead, we are considered a member of God’s family, His ambassador for Christ, and a child of light.

In the face of the dangers present in the promised land, the spies lost their faith. Only Caleb and Joshua kept their faith and were ready to forge ahead, but they were outnumbered by spies who believed the fortified cities were too great even for God to overcome.

2. When faith fails, we forget God’s past power and His future promise (Num. 14:1-12).

¹ Then all the congregation raised a loud cry, and the people wept that night. ² And all the people of Israel grumbled 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!” ³ Why is the LORD bringing 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?” ⁴ And they said to one another, “Let us choose a leader and go back to Egypt.”

⁵ Then Moses and Aaron fell on their faces before all the assembly of the congregation of the people of Israel. ⁶ And Joshua the son of Nun and Caleb the son of Jephunneh, who were among those who had spied out the land, tore their clothes ⁷ and said to all the congregation of the people of Israel, “The land, which we passed through to spy it out, is an exceedingly good land. ⁸ If the LORD delights in us, he will bring us into this land and give it to us, a land that flows with milk and honey. ⁹ 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.” ¹⁰ Then all the congregation said to stone them with stones. But the glory of the LORD appeared at the tent of meeting to all the people of Israel.

¹¹ And the LORD said to Moses, “How long will this people despise me? And how long will they not believe in me, in spite of all the signs that I have done among them? ¹² I will strike them with the pestilence and disinherit them, and I will make of you a nation greater and mightier than they.”

When the leaders lost their faith, the people of Israel faced a crisis. Choosing slavery or death at the moment seemed a better option. They were ready to stone Moses, Aaron, Joshua, and Caleb to death and then try their luck crossing the wilderness back to Egypt. The Israelites’ choice in this passage was based on a total lack of memory. All that God had done was somehow no longer in their mind. They neglected the power of God displayed in the past as well as the promise of God for their future.



When do you find it easiest for your feelings and fears to overwhelm your faith?



What do you turn to for strength in moments when your faith is faltering? Why?

God freed the Israelites from Egyptian slavery. As believers, we have been freed from sin. The Israelites were facing insurmountable odds to experiencing victory in Canaan. The temptation we face is also an impossible power to overcome—when we fight on our own. The Israelites faced enemies that were bigger, stronger, and had every perceivable advantage. The church stands against the world, the flesh, and the Devil, who all seem to carry an advantage over us, but this too is just perceived.



Voices from Church History

“For faith is only real when there is obedience, never without it, and faith only becomes faith in the act of obedience.”²

—Dietrich Bonhoeffer
(1906-1945)

When we consider what we face in life, we must view our circumstances in light of what we've experienced in Christ. God has empowered believers to face both difficulties and temptations. God's Spirit works in us so that we can accomplish God's assignment for us. Looking at the world around us as if it were filled with giants who cannot be overcome is our commentary on both the enemy and God. It increases the enemy's size and minimizes God's work. The antidote is to remember what the Lord has done in the past as the basis for our faith in how He will continue to fulfill His Word to us.



When have you faced a difficult circumstance similar to a time when God delivered you in the past?



Did reflecting on God's work in your life in the past give you strength for the present trial? Why or why not?

In verse 11, God asked, "How long will they not believe in me, in spite of all the signs that I have done among them?" This is a question believers should always consider. Every work of God in our lives is an opportunity to trust Him more deeply. It is God's way of helping us grow in our faith and follow Him with greater abandon.

As Christians, we have something the Israelites did not. We have the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. The presence of God is no longer at a religious, sacred construction. God personally resides in us, as believers in Jesus, to give a witness of His ongoing work. The Holy Spirit's presence with us is a down payment of what He has promised will be fulfilled in the future. He comforts and emboldens us for everyday living. All the while, the Spirit reminds us of the future glory that makes Canaan a mere shadow of God's heavenly dwelling.



Why does the Spirit dwelling in us give us an advantage over the Israelites whenever our faith begins to falter?

3. When faith fails, we need a faithful representative to plead for us (Num. 14:13-20).

How did the Lord respond to the people's faithlessness? He was ready to destroy them, until Moses began to intercede for his people. God was going to send a devastating plague among the Israelites and restart the building process of His great nation. As the Lord, He held the right to do as He pleased to fulfill His perfect will. So Moses appealed not to the Israelites' goodness but to God's greatness. He lifted up the name of God and reminded God of His character:

¹³ But Moses said to the LORD, "Then the Egyptians will hear of it, for you brought up this people in your might from among them, ¹⁴ and they will tell the inhabitants of this land. They have heard that you, O LORD, are in the midst of this people. For you, O LORD, are seen face to face, and your cloud stands over them and you go before them, in a pillar of cloud by day and in a pillar of fire by night. ¹⁵ Now if you kill this people as one man, then the nations who have heard your fame will say, ¹⁶ 'It is because the LORD was not able to bring this people into the land that he swore to give to them that he has killed them in the wilderness.' ¹⁷ And now, please let the power of the LORD be great as you have promised, saying, ¹⁸ 'The LORD is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression, but he will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, to the third and the fourth generation.' ¹⁹ Please pardon the iniquity of this people, according to the greatness of your steadfast love, just as you have forgiven this people, from Egypt until now."

²⁰ Then the LORD said, "I have pardoned, according to your word."

Moses stood before God as the representative for his people. He pleaded with God to show mercy so that the name of the Lord would be more widely known. Certainly, any work that God does proves His power, but Moses prayed that God would use this circumstance of the Hebrews' rebellion to display His power in His ability to forgive sin—once again. Moses asked for God's forgiveness.

Moses asked God to forgive "according to the greatness of your steadfast love, just as you have forgiven this people, from Egypt until now" (v. 19). The forgiveness of our Heavenly Father is based on His love, not on our merit, penitent spirit, or ability to straighten out our lives. When God immediately pardoned the sin of the Israelites, He mentioned nothing of their ability to keep covenant faithfulness. The good news given to us by God is that His forgiveness is based on His power, not on our abilities.



What characteristics of God did Moses mention when pleading for mercy?



God could have displayed His power in judgment. Why do you think Moses asked for mercy?

When Moses stood before God and begged for mercy upon the people, he gave us a picture of what was to come. The people needed an advocate. They had one in Moses. The problem, however, was that Moses died, and he is still dead! This was a temporary advocacy by a temporary leader in a temporary time. We need a permanent solution.

God's pardon finds its ultimate fulfillment not in the temporary circumstance of the Israelites standing on the edge of the promised land. Rather, we have found it in the journey Jesus made to the cross, the grave, and rising from the dead. Only God in the flesh can be our perfect advocate.

Jesus lived as we do so as to sympathize with our weaknesses. Israel would spend 40 years in the wilderness, wandering around in faithlessness. Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness being tempted by Satan, but unlike Israel, He passed the test. As the perfect representative, He gave the sacrifice we should give so as to grant salvation by His grace and through our faith. He rose from the dead, a state we cannot overcome, so as to defeat sin, death, hell, and the Enemy. And now Jesus sits at the right hand of the Father to intercede for you and me every moment of our existence.

99 Essential Christian Doctrines

69. Faith

Biblical faith is the resting, or trusting, in Christ alone for salvation (John 3:16-21). More than being simply a mental agreement of historical facts, genuine faith begins with a recognition and confession of the truth of the gospel (1 John 4:13-16), followed by a receiving of Christ as Lord and Savior of one's life (John 1:10-13). Biblical faith is not blind faith, for it rests on the historical life, death, and resurrection of Christ.

Furthermore, because we have been fully represented before God by Jesus, we now are able to represent God before the people of the world who do not know Him. Today, our calling is not to conquer the nations but to take the gospel to them. No matter if the obstacles make us feel like “grasshoppers,” we trust that God’s power is greater than our own and that He will give us all we need to accomplish His mission.



Voices from Church History

“Give me a hundred men who fear nothing but sin and love nothing but God, and I will shake the gates of hell.”³

—John Wesley (1703-1791)



As the people’s representative, Moses showed interest in what “the nations” would think if God destroyed the Israelites. How can the church show interest in seeing that the glory of God’s forgiveness is known among the nations?

Conclusion

The world is filled with insurmountable obstacles. We face enemies stronger than we can imagine; our hearts fill up with doubts and fears that we try to fend off. But in the end, we need our Great High Priest, King Jesus, to rescue us from our sin, our fear, and our doubt. Just as God met the Hebrews in the desert with a desire to restore, He will meet you in the desert places of life. It is God’s desire to redeem, not destroy. He enjoys delivering you into the work He has prepared for His people. It is the beauty of the gospel that leads us to repent and follow Him with a growing faith.

CHRIST CONNECTION: When Israel was tempted in the wilderness, the people failed to trust the Lord and faced 40 years of wandering. When Jesus was tempted in the wilderness for 40 days, He remained faithful. Through His obedience, He became the representative who pleads for us before the Lord.

HIS MISSION, YOUR MISSION

MISSIONAL APPLICATION: God calls us not to conquer the nations but to take the gospel to them no matter the obstacles, knowing that God's power is greater than our own.

1. How can our group/church encourage, rather than discourage, faith in God's strength?

2. What are some circumstances in which we can rely on the Spirit's power as we trust God's future promise?

3. In light of Moses' intercession for the Israelites, write a prayer asking God to show mercy and forgiveness through Christ for someone who needs Him.
