

In the Wilderness | The Gospel in the Book of Numbers

“The Central Rebellion”

11.13.16

When they returned from spying out the land, at the end of forty days,²⁶ they proceeded to come to Moses and Aaron and to all the congregation of the sons of Israel in the wilderness of Paran, at Kadesh; and they brought back word to them and to all the congregation and showed them the fruit of the land.²⁷ Thus they told him, and said, "We went in to the land where you sent us; and it certainly does flow with milk and honey, and this is its fruit."²⁸ "Nevertheless, the people who live in the land are strong, and the cities are fortified and very large; and moreover, we saw the descendants of Anak there."²⁹ "Amalek is living in the land of the Negev and the Hittites and the Jebusites and the Amorites are living in the hill country, and the Canaanites are living by the sea and by the side of the Jordan."

³⁰ Then Caleb quieted the people before Moses and said, "We should by all means go up and take possession of it, for we will surely overcome it."³¹ But the men who had gone up with him said, "We are not able to go up against the people, for they are too strong for us."³² So they gave out to the sons of Israel a bad report of the land which they had spied out, saying, "The land through which we have gone, in spying it out, is a land that devours its inhabitants; and all the people whom we saw in it are men of great size."³³ "There also we saw the Nephilim (the sons of Anak are part of the Nephilim); and we became like grasshoppers in our own sight, and so we were in their sight."

¹⁴ Then all the congregation lifted up their voices and cried, and the people wept that night.² All the sons of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron; and 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 plunder; would it not be better for us to return to Egypt?"⁴ So they said to one another, "Let us appoint a leader and return to Egypt."

⁵ Then Moses and Aaron fell on their faces in the presence of all the assembly of the congregation of the sons of Israel.⁶ Joshua the son of Nun and Caleb the son of Jephunneh, of those who had spied out the land, tore their clothes;⁷ and they spoke to all the congregation of the sons of Israel, saying, "The land which we passed through to spy out is an exceedingly good land."⁸ "If the LORD is pleased with us, then He will bring us into this land and give it to us-- a land which flows with milk and honey."⁹ "Only do not rebel against the LORD; and do not fear the people of the land, for they will be our prey. Their protection has been removed from them, and the LORD is with us; do not fear them."¹⁰ But all the congregation said to stone them with stones. Then the glory of the LORD appeared in the tent of meeting to all the sons of Israel.¹¹ The LORD said to Moses, "How long will this people spurn Me? And how long will they not believe in Me, despite all the signs which I have performed in their midst?"

We've been looking at The Book of Numbers; it's the history of the wilderness wanderings...after Exodus. It's a story that's referenced over and over, later in the Bible – it comes up repeatedly in the Psalms and the Prophets...and even in the next book: Deuteronomy BEGINS with a retelling of the episode we just read. St. Paul wrote, “these things happened to them as an example for US... written for our instruction...” (1st Cor 10.11)

After the Israelites were freed BY GOD from Egypt and after they got the Law at Mt. Sinai and after they received instructions and BUILT the Tabernacle (the bridal suite, the portable sanctuary, the model of Eden...) then they followed the Glowing Column of Cloud... journeying toward the Promised Land.

Today, they come to the very border of their destination and they're told to send a reconnaissance team...to confirm that, "this IS INDEED the kind of home that God promised...take 40 days to scout out the land..." And it is at this critical moment that they fail in a monumental and catastrophic way...

David Stubbs in his great work on The Book of Numbers comments very simply...gravely... "It is Israel's darkest hour." Something happens in THIS rebellion that will keep them OUT of the Promised Land for forty years... A whole generation will die in the wilderness... and we're left wondering, "WHAT was the sin that was so serious in the sight of God?"

Was it a sexual sin? Was it greed or hatred or racism? Was it envy/jealousy as we saw last week? Was it defiance and mob violence (which does occur!)? Was it pride/arrogance/idolatry... WHAT was the real root cause of the failing; what's the engine for ALL sin?

Let's look at the SIN OF ALL SINS: **1) Bitter Root 2) Strange Fruit and 3) Modern Pursuit**

They've begun the journey...probably took about a month... Whenever they stop to camp, they reconstruct the model of Eden, the Tabernacle in the center of all the "NUMBERED" tribes... It reminds them that God is in their midst (He's attached Himself to them by sacred covenant) and it reminds them that while they were MADE FOR EDEN, they are NOT there now – they're in the jungle NOT the Garden.

The center of this book (as we keep reiterating) is a series of seven rebellions arranged deliberately to make us look at the CENTRAL REBELLION - #4 of 7 – THIS ONE, the refusal to enter the Land of Promise.

This is the central rebellion – and we've already seen the grumbling against God, the complaining about food, the envy of some leaders against Moses... but THIS is THE BIG ONE...and not only in this book. THIS IS positioned so that it screams, "THIS is THE problem – this is THE sin from which all other sins spring."

It whispers in the other rebellions but here it is full volume – the Bitter Root for THEM AND FOR US!

Moses recruits some valiant men to go on this dangerous mission... i.e. to confirm that this is indeed what God said it would be. God is inviting a confirmation of His promises. The whole episode unfolds in FIVE ACTS (we're only looking at scene 2 & 3).

They DO go in... they DO look around forty days and they DO report that everything IS (in this foreign land where none of them had been) IT REALLY IS AS GOOD AS GOD HAD PROMISED.

And then (v. 28) a big word, “Nevertheless...” there are other considerations – there are people already living there – BIG PEOPLE – giants in castles...foreigners ... scary people.

The picture these leaders paint is ominous.

Then a man, a leader named Caleb, takes the microphone... he sees the tide turning and tries to rein it in... “We will overcome any opposition” but the other leaders say, “WE CAN’T – our feasibility study shows that WE have no chance and that THEY are too strong for US.”

So they gave out a bad report – the Hebrew word means “to whisper”...as in slander.

And then those “bad report” leaders issue a kind of bottom line assessment – “That land devours people who go there – there be giants there (Nephilim) – we look like grasshoppers in comparison to them.”

And THAT did it... the tide has turned ...the bad news won the day and the people are weeping and crying and grumbling against Moses and Aaron... and they begin to repudiate everything, their identity, their mission, their history, their destiny and the point of the spear is aimed at God, (v. 3) “Why has the LORD brought us to this land to fall by the sword...we should’a died in Egypt.”

They then try to look for a new leader... and Moses and the “good report” leaders call out to God in repentance and Caleb and a man named Joshua try to convince the people how good the land is (just as God promised) “IF THE LORD IS PLEASED WITH US HE WILL BRING US INTO THIS GOOD LAND” (14.8) – it doesn’t depend on us- it depends on HIM and HIS PROMISE...the LORD is with us.” (14.9)

But “the horse is out’a the barn” – the bad news wins... and the people try to stone the two young leaders (Joshua and Caleb)...

And then the LORD gives His own verdict and explanation (last verse) “How long will this people spurn Me? And how long will they not believe in Me, despite all the signs which I have performed in their midst?”

That turns out to be thē bottom line: all the fear, the rebellion, defiance, threats of violence and riots, the re-writing history, the whispering/lying/slander/exaggeration, the fear and defiance, it all stems from this ONE BITTER ROOT – “they will not believe in Me.”

The sin from which all sins emanate is raw unbelief. All the other sins grow out of THIS one bitter root. They will not trust God and His promises... they will not believe.

This is why the great Christian Existentialist philosopher (the Great Dane) Søren Kierkegaard said that IN THE BIBLICAL framework, the opposite of sin is not virtue but faith. (Faith is the opposite of sin.)

It's why the Apostle Paul would write, "whatever is not of faith is sin" (Rom 14.23). It's why that whole chapter in the sermon to the Hebrews (CH 11) interprets the whole of Church History, all the so-called heroes of the Old Testament were no heroes at all – they were weak people who simply leaned against God, depended on God, trusted God and His promises – not virtuous people but believing people.

Why were the leaders sent to spy out the land? IT WAS NOT TO CONDUCT A FEASIBILITY STUDY or even primarily to devise a military strategy – it was to gather evidence. God allowed them that because He knew their faith was weak. Moses told them to gather fruit/evidence (v. 20) and they DID.

It was NOT the kind of fruit they were used to eating in Egypt. Remember? They were missing the produce of Egypt: "we remember the cucumbers and the melons and the leeks and the onions and the garlic, (11.5)". But THIS was strange fruit – the kind of fruit one might find in Eden (and the Tabernacle reminded them of Eden and of pomegranates – woven all around the priest's robes – pomegranates – like in Eden).

And they DID bring back that strange fruit – not the onions of Egypt but the fruit of Eden as a kind of pledge, as evidence that God's promises were true and trustworthy... massive clusters of grapes and figs and pomegranates (like they'd seen in the Tabernacle) – God will indeed restore His people to Eden – this was a SIGN/guarantee.

And because God wants our trust...our hearts...because we triumph NOT by virtue nor human effort but by GRACE...and because FAITH is the way grace is received (the organ of reception – lungs receive O2 and ears receive sound-waves and FAITH receives grace...faith is the organ of reception...FAITH receives GRACE) because we triumph by GRACE not by virtue THEREFORE faith is all important and unbelief is CATASTROPHIC – that's why God let them see the strange fruit – to strengthen their faith... FAITH RECEIVES GRACE.

Faith is NOT a struggle to realize our potential. Faith is NOT a commitment to do our best. Faith is not the effort to think positively or the inner strength to just know that "it's all gonna work out in the end".

Faith is not doing your best. Faith is not the determination to unleash the winner that lives within...Faith is NOT active at all. (Rom 4.5)

Faith is the organ of reception. Faith rests. Faith receives. Faith is passive. Faith despairs of self and self-effort of any kind and FAITH SIMPLY PUTS ITS WEIGHT INTO THE HANDS OF ANOTHER. Faith says, "I can't but HE can...He will...He promised."

God is good and faith rests in that... even when the fruit of evidence can't be seen.

You know people say, "Seeing is believing" and I admit it: I want to see ("Lord, haste the day when my faith shall be sight – the clouds be rolled back as a scroll!") but faith really doesn't come by seeing – they saw the strange fruit and they still didn't believe.

Faith comes by hearing (Rom 10.17) – and in this story UNBELIEF came by hearing too! The bad report was what they believed.

We SEE evidence that WE think points to the fact that God is not well-intentioned toward us... We SEE a world that seems out of control. We experience loss... failure... we are betrayed...we sin...we are sinned against AND we may conclude that God cannot be trusted.

But you are here today (whether you know it or not) because God wants to strengthen your faith...strengthen the way you receive grace. God wants to show you some strange fruit so you'll know His promises can be trusted.

You know that phrase, "Strange Fruit", is the title of a song made famous by the great Billie Holiday (do you know it?) It's a tragic song of our shameful past in this nation when men were lynched and left hanging in the trees... "strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees".

But there was once a Man who was indeed lynched and hanged on a tree (Gal 3.13) and that horrible sight is the evidence/fruit we need – that is the Good Report, the Good News we need to hear. That Good News/Gospel says to our weak faith, "The God who gave His Son to hang from a tree, He can be trusted completely – this is the God who keeps His promise – this is the God who really IS GOOD... the God who loves YOU and who gave everything in order to have you and bring YOU back to Eden ...into His presence... Jesus Christ, hanging from a tree is all the evidence you need."

This is the Strange Fruit – the evidence from the Promised Land – look at it... even better, listen to it (faith comes by HEARING!)

And THIS hearing the Good News; this daily bulletin that GOD IS GOOD and proved it once and for ALL (see the evidence – hear the joyful sound) – this is the Key to our modern pursuit of the Kingdom of God.

This is what will turn your present difficulties into depth and wisdom and joy. This is what keeps people from getting bitter when they experience loss and pain and failure and heartache. They look at the pain and they interpret it saying, "God will turn it into good (Gen 50.20, Rom 8.28) – God will bring beauty out of ashes – God will work all things together for my good – the Man Hanging from a Tree is all the evidence I need... the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus Christ is the Fruit that convinces me."

When YOU are convinced by the giants in the land and by the whispers of slander against God...when all around your soul gives way...when faith is failing – see the Goodness of God in the Cross...the evidence/the fruit.

And when God calls you... to a job that is difficult ...a marriage that is tired...a child in rebellion... singleness that is so lonely... a ministry that is thankless...WHEN GOD CALLS YOU TO CHANGE...to deny yourself and resist temptation... and do the impossible...it is the Fruit on the pole...the Man on the Cross that signifies – "Ah! God withholds no good thing from those who trust Him – I am weak but He is strong – God is with me – the Gospel tells me so... God is able to defeat the giants, keep me from the enemy... He can claim the land... raise the dead."

Be careful little eyes, what you see. Be careful little ears what you hear... BE careful little mouths what you say – leaders especially are warned here – WE MUST BE THE GOOD NEWS PEOPLE... God is good despite what evidence you THINK you see to the contrary... Let's help each other believe... "Lord, help my unbelief!" (Mar 9.24) Let's receive the Evidence of our Father's unwavering love – let's see the world through the lens of the Cross.

That's the Strange Fruit – and that's the Key to our modern pursuit of our callings and God's Kingdom.