

DON'T SUCCUMB TO INTIMIDATION

13 Jehovah spoke to Moses, saying, ²"Send men to explore the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the children of Israel. Send one of the leaders from each of their fathers' tribes." ...

²⁶They came back to Moses and Aaron and to the whole congregation of the children of Israel encamped at Kadesh in the wilderness of Paran. There they reported to them and to the whole congregation and showed them the fruit of the land. ²⁷They gave Moses this account: We went into the land to which you sent us, and it certainly does flow with milk and honey! This is its fruit. ²⁸However, the people who live there are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large. Furthermore, we saw the descendants of Anak there. ²⁹The Amalekites live in the Negev;* the Hittites and the Jebusites and the Amorites live in the hill country; and the Canaanites live near the sea and along the Jordan River. ³⁰Then Caleb silenced the people before Moses and said, "Let us immediately go up and take possession of the land; for we are fully able to succeed!" ³¹But the men who had gone up with him protested, "We are not able to attack those people, for they are stronger than we are." ³²So they gave the children of Israel a negative report concerning the land they had explored. They said, "The land we explored devours those who live in it; and all the people we saw there are men of great size. ³³We also saw the Nephilim there." (The descendants of Anak come from the Nephilim.) "[Compared to them,] we seemed like grasshoppers to ourselves and to them as well."

14 The whole congregation raised their voices and wailed, and that night the people wept. ²All the children of Israel grumbled against Moses and against Aaron, and the whole congregation said to them, "We wish that we had died in the land of Egypt, or that we had died in this wilderness! ³Why has Jehovah brought us to this land, so that we might be killed with the sword? Our wives and our little children will be taken as plunder! Is it not better for us to go back to Egypt?" ⁴They said among themselves, "Let us choose a leader for ourselves and go back to Egypt!"

⁵Then Moses and Aaron fell facedown in front of the whole congregation of the children of Israel assembled there. ⁶Joshua, the son of Nun, and Caleb, the son of Jephunneh, who were among those who had explored the land, tore their clothes in grief⁷ and addressed the whole congregation of the children of Israel, saying, "The land which we explored is a very good land. ⁸If Jehovah is pleased with us he will bring us into this land and give it to us. It is a land that flows with milk and honey. ⁹Only do not rebel against Jehovah, and do not fear the inhabitants of the land. We will consume them like bread**; their protection has been removed from them and Jehovah is with us. Do not be afraid of them!" ¹⁰But the whole congregation called out for them to be stoned. Then the glory of Jehovah appeared at the Tent of Meeting to all the children of Israel...

³⁶So the men whom Moses had sent to explore the land, those who had returned and caused the whole congregation to grumble against him by presenting a negative report against the land—³⁷those same men who presented a negative report about the land—died by a plague in the presence of Jehovah. ³⁸Of the men who went to explore the land, only Joshua the son of Nun and Caleb the son of Jephunneh survived.

³⁹When Moses reported these words [of Jehovah] to all the children of Israel, they mourned bitterly. ⁴⁰Early the next morning they went up toward the high hill country. They said, "We are here! We will go up to the place Jehovah has promised [to give us!] We have sinned [in not obeying him.]" ⁴¹But Moses said, "Why are you now transgressing against the commandment of Jehovah, since you cannot succeed? ⁴²Do not go up, or else you will be struck down by your enemies, because Jehovah is not with you. ⁴³The Amalekites and the Canaanites will confront you, and you will be killed with the sword. Because you have turned back from following Jehovah, Jehovah will not be with you." ⁴⁴Nevertheless, in their presumption they went up toward the high hill country, but neither Jehovah's ark of the covenant nor Moses left the camp. ⁴⁵Then the Amalekites and the Canaanites who live in the hill country came down and attacked them and beat them down all the way to Hormah. (Num. 13:1-14:45)

*Or, "the South," **Literally, "*they are bread for us*"

Introduction

The nineteenth-century British preacher Charles Spurgeon recounts an incident from his youth that taught him a lesson about intimidation. He writes:

One night, having preached in a country village, I was walking home, all by myself, along a lonely footpath. I do not know why, but I felt prepared to be alarmed, when, sure enough, I saw something standing in the hedge along side the pathway. The thing was ghastly, giant-like, with outstretched arms. Surely, I thought, for once I've come across the supernatural; here is some restless spirit performing its midnight march beneath the moon.

I deliberated with myself for a moment, then plucked up my courage and determined to solve the mystery. The monster stood on the other side of a ditch, right in the hedge. I jumped the ditch, and found myself grasping an old tree, which some prankster had taken pains to cover with whitewash, with the intention of frightening simpletons.

Spurgeon says: That old tree has served me a good turn many times, for I have learned from it to leap at difficulties, and find them vanish or turn to triumphs. (C. H. Spurgeon, *The Early Years*, pp.187-188)

The people of Israel would have done well to have learned the same lesson when they stood at the border of the Promised Land. But rather than trust the LORD and see the difficulty they faced turned to triumph, they allowed themselves to be controlled by intimidation. The consequence: it led to disobedience and the rejection of God's will.

The lesson we need to learn from the experience of Old Testament Israel as recounted in Numbers 13-14 is this: Don't succumb to intimidation, because the divine consequences may be severe.

I. Don't Succumb to Intimidation, and Thus Avoid the Divine Consequences

The ten spies, and the people to whom they gave their report, allowed themselves to be governed by a spirit of apprehension and timidity, instead of confidence in Christ. They were intimidated by the strength and size of the enemy and his fortifications: *"the people who live there are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large. Furthermore, we saw the descendants of Anak there"* (Num. 13:28.) By their report the ten spies dissuaded the people of Israel from obeying the commandment of the LORD to enter the land.

Those ten spies thought that they were sparing themselves and the nation and their children from an awful consequence: being annihilated by their enemies. But in fact, those ten spies, by succumbing to ungodly intimidation and thereby recommending the "safe" course of retreat, were exposing themselves and Israel to the divine and severe consequences imposed by the LORD.

The LORD declares that none of the ten spies, or the men of Israel whom they persuaded to be intimidated with them, would see the Promised Land:

... be sure that all those men who have seen my glory and my signs which I performed in Egypt and in the wilderness, but still have tested me these ten times and have not paid attention to my voice, ²³shall not see the land I pledged to their forefathers. No one who has treated me with contempt shall see it. (Num.14:22-23)

These men would not be permitted to see the Promised Land because, although they saw previous displays of the LORD's power against Egypt and in the wilderness, they still would not heed His command to trust and obey. On the contrary, by allowing themselves to succumb to intimidation, they were actually despising the LORD. They were treating Him *"with contempt"* by not trusting Him, (their attitude was: the LORD cannot or will not take care of us), and by not fearing Him, (their attitude was: we have greater things to fear than God.)

The LORD declares that He Himself will subject the people to the very alternative they requested:

As surely as I live, declares Jehovah, I will do to you the very things I heard you say. ²⁹Your corpses will fall in this wilderness—everyone of you twenty years old or older who was counted in the census and who has grumbled against me. ³⁰You certainly shall not enter the land that I pledged to give you as a dwelling place ... (Num.14:28-30a)

They were so intimidated by the inhabitants of Canaan that they said they would rather die in the wilderness than contend with the present inhabitants for the Promised Land: *“All the children of Israel grumbled against Moses and against Aaron, and the whole congregation said to them, ‘We wish that we had died in the land of Egypt, or that we had died in this wilderness!’”* (Num. 14:2.) The LORD now sentences them to die in the wilderness and forfeit the privilege of entering the Promised Land of Canaan (Num. 14:28-29.)

The LORD declares that their children shall bear the effect of their transgression:

... your children shall be wanderers in the wilderness for forty years, they shall suffer for your unfaithfulness until your corpses have been consumed by the wilderness. ³⁴For forty years—one year for each of the forty days you explored the land—you will suffer for your iniquities, and you shall know what it is like to have me against you. (Num.14:33-34)

The children shall suffer for the unfaithfulness of their fathers; they will have to wander in the wilderness for 40 years until the former generation has died off.

Sometimes, as in this present instance, the opportunity for reconsideration is denied and the privilege and blessing that could be secured by trust and obedience is forfeited. When the people learned of the divine consequences that the LORD will inflict because of their faithlessness, they mourned bitterly (vs. 39.) They have a change of heart and decide that they will heed the LORD’s initial command and take the land: *“Early the next morning they went up toward the high hill country. They said, ‘We are here! We will go up to the place Jehovah has promised to give us! We have sinned [in not obeying him.]”* (14:40.) But Moses informs them that the LORD has rescinded His original command and issued another: the people are to retreat back into the wilderness (14:41-43.) Yet again they refuse to obey and again they suffer the consequences: they are driven back by the Canaanites (14:44-45.)

Sometimes the LORD provides a future opportunity with the potential for loyalty, service and blessing. Peter betrayed the Lord Jesus on the night of His trial, but on the future occasion of Pentecost Peter withstood the temptation to succumb to intimidation and spoke out boldly for the Lord. But sometimes the LORD does not provide such future opportunities: as in the case of this generation of the people of Israel in the wilderness.

Don’t succumb to intimidation, and thus avoid the divine consequences.

Jehovah spoke to me with his strong hand upon me, instructing me not to follow the way of these people. He said ...¹²...Do not fear what they fear, nor be in dread of it. ¹³Jehovah of hosts, him you must sanctify; he is the one you are to fear, he is the one you are to dread—¹⁴and he will be a sanctuary for you. (Isa.8:11,12b-14a.) The LORD was here referring to the fear of the approaching Assyrian

army that was terrifying the people of Israel. He instructed Isaiah to fear Him and not them—by heeding the LORD’s command to fear Him, Isaiah would find the LORD to be a sanctuary (a safe refuge) for him.

II. Don’t Succumb to Intimidation; Resist the Voices of Fear and Unbelief

From Numbers 13:1-3 we get the impression that it was the LORD’s command to send the twelve spies into the land engage in a reconnaissance mission. Actually it was the LORD’s concession to a timid, hesitant people, as we learn from Deuteronomy 1:20-22):

Then I said to you, You have reached the hill country of the Amorites, that Jehovah our God is giving us. ²¹See, Jehovah your God has given you the land. Go up and take possession of it as Jehovah, the God of your fathers, told you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged. ²²Then all of you came to me and said, Let us send men ahead to spy out the land for us and bring back a report about the route we are to take and the towns to which we will come. (Deut. 1:20-22)

When they reached the border of Canaan Moses exhorted the people to take possession of the land that the LORD promised them. But the people hesitated, they wanted to have more knowledge and assurance: What route will we take? What are the cities like? What can we expect to encounter? They were governed by a spirit of apprehension and timidity, instead of confidence in Christ. The voice of fear and unbelief was loudly evident, counseling: Be cautious, be careful, don’t do anything risky, weigh the evidence and take the “safe” course, always investigate as to whether things are safe. In contrast to such voices, note 2 Timothy 1:7 and John 16:33,

God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but the Spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline. (2 Tim. 1:7)

In the world you have tribulation. But have courage; I have conquered the world. (Jn. 16:33b)

Upon surveying the land, the majority of the spies brought back a negative report (Numbers 13:32.) Their observations are recorded as follows: those people are strong, ...their cities are greatly fortified, ...we saw there the sons of Anak (the giants), ...the Amalekites (a fierce, war-like people) occupy the land. Their conclusion: We can’t do it; the opposition is too strong (vs.31.)

Here are leaders (“*princes of Israel*,” vs. 2) who lack spiritual wisdom—they fail to put God at the center of their reasoning and think the way God thinks; they fail to use His Word as the basis for their decision-making. In contrast to their sinfully defective reasoning, note the godly reasoning provided by Scripture:

What, then, shall we say in response to this? Since God is for us, who can be against us? (Rom. 8:31)

... he said to me, My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. ¹⁰That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties, for when I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Cor. 12:9-10)

You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. (1 Jn. 4:4)

Devise your strategy, but it will be thwarted; propose your plan, but it will not stand, for God is with us. (Isa. 8:10)

Here are leaders who lack spiritual perception—they lack a God-consciousness, they leave God out of the equation. In contrast to their sinfully faulty reasoning, consider the word spoken by Elisha to his servant (2 Kings 6:15-17), the testimony of Jahaziel given to King Jehoshaphat (2 Chronicles 20:14-17), the prayer of Jeremiah (Jeremiah 32:17),

When the servant of the man of God got up and went out early the next morning, an army with horses and chariots had surrounded the city. Oh, my lord, what shall we do? the servant asked. ¹⁶Do not be afraid, the prophet answered. Those who are with us are more than those who are with them. ¹⁷And Elisha prayed, O Jehovah, open his eyes so he may see. Then Jehovah opened the servant's eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha. (2 Kings 6:15-17)

... the Spirit of Jehovah came upon Jahaziel ...¹⁵He said: Listen, King Jehoshaphat and all who live in Judah and Jerusalem! This is what Jehovah says to you: Do not be afraid or discouraged because of this vast army, for the battle is not yours, but God's. ... ¹⁷You will not have to fight this battle. Take up your positions; stand firm and see the deliverance Jehovah will give you, O Judah and Jerusalem. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged. Go out to face them tomorrow, and Jehovah will be with you. (2 Chronicles 20:14a, 15, 17)

Jeremiah prayed, Ah, Sovereign LORD, you have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and outstretched arm. Nothing is too hard for you. (Jeremiah 32:17)

They were who allowed the voices of fear and unbelief to direct their decision-making and dictate their actions; causing them to draw the conclusion: We can't do it. The opposition is too strong. In contrast to their reasoning that resulted in their acquiescing to intimidation, note the confident and godly testimony of the Apostle Paul: *"I can do all things by him who strengthens me"* (Phil. 4:13.)

The majority report discouraged the people and instilled in them an attitude of fear and despair. They maintain that it was better for them to die back in Egypt or in the wilderness than to face the challenge that lay before them (Num.14:2.) They question and doubt the LORD's covenant faithfulness: *"Why has Jehovah brought us to this land, so that we might be killed with the sword?"* (Num.14:3.) They desire to make plans to retreat and return to Egypt (Num. 14:4.) The voice of fear and unbelief had come to grip and dominate their thinking, causing them to draw the blasphemous conclusion: We have been betrayed by the LORD, let us retreat and desert His covenant. In contrast, note the testimony of Hebrews 13:5-6, *"[the Lord] himself has said, 'I will by no means fail you, neither will I in any way forsake you.' So, with sure confidence we say, 'The Lord is my helper; I will not fear.'"*

Don't succumb to intimidation; resist the voices of fear and unbelief.

Do not be afraid, for I am with you. Do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you; surely, I will help you; surely, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand. (Isa. 41:10)

III. Don't Succumb to Intimidation; Heed the Voices of Faith and Courage

Caleb stands up and gives the minority report: *"Let us immediately go up and take possession [of the land;] for we are fully able to succeed!"* (Num. 13:30.) He and Joshua explain to the people the source of their confidence: *"If Jehovah is pleased with us he will bring us into this land and give it to us. It is a land that flows with milk and honey"* (Num. 14:8.) *"If the LORD is pleased with us, He will bring us into the land"*—the LORD is pleased with those who trust and obey Him.

Together they urge the people neither to rebel against the LORD nor to fear the inhabitants of Canaan: *"Only do not rebel against Jehovah, and do not fear the inhabitants of the land. We will consume them like bread; their protection has been removed from them and Jehovah is with us. Do not be afraid of them!"* (Num. 14:9.)

The circumstances and situation may change. Old Testament Israel was called to conquer the land of Canaan. The New Testament church is called to stand for the truth of the gospel even in the face of martyrdom, as the Lord Jesus exhorts His church in Smyrna, *"Do not fear the things you are about to suffer ... Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life"* (Rev. 2:10.)

But the challenge to be faithful, ...and the promise of the LORD's sustaining and strengthening presence, ...and the promise of ultimate victory all remain the same: *"Here is a trustworthy saying: If we died with him, we will also live with him; ¹²if we endure, we will also reign with him"* (2 Tim. 2:11-12a.)

Don't succumb to intimidation; heed the voices of faith and courage.

Live your life only in a way that is worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that if I come and see you—or if I remain absent what I will hear about you is that you are standing firm in one spirit, and with one soul are contending for the faith of the gospel, ²⁸and that you are in no way being intimidated by those who oppose you. (Phil. 1:27-28a)

I do not consider my life in any way as being precious for myself, so that I may accomplish my course, and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. (Acts 20:24)

Whoever wants to save his life, will lose it; but whoever loses his life for my sake and for the sake of the gospel shall save it. (Mk. 8:35)

Conclusion

Are you presently facing a challenge that intimidates you and threatens to drive you into retreat and the apparent security of taking “the safe course?”

Let us learn from the tragic example of Old Testament Israel: When they allowed themselves to be controlled by intimidation it led to disobedience and severe consequences.

Let us remember the lesson Charles Spurgeon learned: I have learned from that old tree to leap at difficulties, and find them vanish or turn to triumphs.

Let us heed the message of Scripture: *“Be strong in the Lord and in his mighty strength”* (Eph. 6:10.)