

12 lessons from 12 spies

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[0 : 0 0] Well, tonight we're going to turn back to the passage that we read in the book of Numbers.

We're going to look at really this whole incident that we read about, but we can just recap by reading verses 7 to 9, 6 to 9 of chapter 14. Joshua the son of Nun and Caleb the son of Jefonias were among those who had spied out the land, tore their clothes and said to all the congregation of the people of Israel, the land which we pass through to spy it out is an exceedingly good land. 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. Only do not rebel against the Lord and do not fear the people of this land, for they are bred for us, their protection is removed from them and the Lord is with us, do not fear them. Now this incident which I'm sure many of us will be familiar with is one that comes at a key moment in redemptive history. Redemptive history is the term that we use to describe the fact that God's plan of salvation is worked out through various stages of history and that's why much of the Bible particularly, well both the Old Testament and the New Testament, record key historical events. Numbers 13 and 14, the passage that we read, is a very important moment in the redempted history that the Bible presents before us.

And in order to see that we're going to just start by summarising where we have reached in terms of God's redemptive plan. Back in Genesis chapter 12, God entered a covenant with Abraham and we see the first of these key figures in God's redemptive plan that works across the ages of history.

God came to Abraham, he made a covenant with him and part of that covenant was the promise that Abraham and his descendants would be given a certain portion of land at the eastern end of the Mediterranean. The land was promised to Abraham which is why we call it the promised land.

In the generations following Abraham, his family grew to such an extent that it became a family nation and that nation was named after Abraham's grandson Jacob to whom God gave the name Israel. So it was still a family but it was so big it was becoming more like a nation.

[2 : 4 6] As part of the growth of that family in the time of Jacob's sons, he moved, the family moved to Egypt and that's what we read about towards the end of Genesis. But there the family nation continued to grow and grow and grow but that growth was so great that the family nation of Israel came to be viewed as a threat by the Egyptians and so the great family nation of Israel was forced into slavery. That continued for many years, for 400 years until God raised up Moses who was to lead the nation out of slavery so that they could return to the land that had been originally promised to their ancestor Abraham. And so that that great exodus from Egypt is of course what we find in the book of Exodus. After leaving Egypt the Israelites were given

God's law at Mount Sinai. That was to show them how they were to live as God's people. It was preparing them to enter the land that was giving them the guidance, the teaching and the instruction that they needed to operate and function as a nation of God's people and a key part of that was to be distinctive from the nations that were around them. So they are building up across these moments in redemptive history all working towards the great moment when they would be ready to enter the promised land. And that's where we've reached in Romans in Numbers 13 and 14. The people of Israel are on the border of the promised land and as they were there preparing themselves to take possession of the land, Moses sent out 12 men to go and spy out this territory. And this is why it's a key moment in the redemptive history of the Old Testament because if you like this is the home straight of God's plan to bring his people out of Egypt. They had been given wonderful promises in the past and through the centuries of slavery that they had been through they had been aware that these promises had remained unfulfilled. But now they have come out of Egypt in a stunning

Exodus. They've been given God's law to guide them as to how to live. They are ready to go and all they have to do is take the final step. This is it. This is the moment they are on the brink of the promised land. This is really what the whole thing was all about all along. The goal was not to have an exodus. The goal was not just to have tablets of law and instruction. The goal was to finally take possession and be, take possession of the land and be God's people in God's land. They were about to take the last step of a long journey. The promises were about to become a reality.

This is a big moment for Israel. And they blew it. What should have been the final step was a disaster. It was a failure.

12 spies went out and although two of them came back with a positive message, the other 10 gave such a negative report that it sent the people into turmoil and fear. And what should have been a moment of great, of spectacular success was a moment of tragic failure. And I want us just to look at this together tonight and to look at it very simply. I want us simply to ask ourselves what are the lessons that are in this passage that we can learn. One of the great emphases that's been presented before us in this passage is the contrast between the 10 and the two. And by looking at the approach of the 10 spies and of Caleb and Joshua, we can learn a lot, not just about them and their circumstances, but also about what it's like for us as we try to live our lives as followers of Jesus Christ. So as I said, we're going to just be pretty straightforward in our structure tonight. We're going to look at six examples of negative errors made by the 10 spies. And then we're going to look at six positive lessons exemplified by Caleb and Joshua, which is why our title is 12 lessons from 12 spies. So first of all, we're going to look at six lessons from the 10.

[8 : 06] And I suppose when we think about these 10 men, it's quite easy to criticize them. I certainly find that when I read these verses, I tend to think to myself, well, I wouldn't be like them. And in my mind, I align myself with Caleb and Joshua, which is a good thing to do in many ways, because they are the ones that we want to emulate. But I suppose I must recognize that the 10 display characteristics and flaws that are all too easy to slip into. And as we look at these, the 10 and the way they behaved, we need to be ready to acknowledge that we have probably made the same mistakes ourselves. So where did they go wrong? Well, first of all, they displayed a fear of people.

When you look at the spies, they had a very positive view of the land itself. It really does flow with milk and honey, but their report is that the land is too strong. The people are too strong.

Numbers 13, 31, the men who'd gone up with them said, we're not able to go up against the people because they are stronger than we are. The 10 were intimidated by the people that they had seen.

And that's a very, very easy trap for us to fall into. And fear of our fellow men and women can manifest itself in lots of different ways. In the case of the spies, it was physical intimidation.

And I can remember feeling like that myself in first year in the Nicholson. I remember going to the Nicholson and I thought that the fifth and sixth years were giants. And they seemed so big and so strong. And of course, it's strange now because now when I meet these people, they're tiny.

[10:02] But back then they seemed so big. We can, so that was a physical intimidation. But for us now, more often than not, we're crippled not so much by physical intimidation, not so much by what people look like, but we are scared of what people think. And we're scared of what people say.

It applies generally in many areas of life. We're scared of what people think of our jobs, of our achievements, of our possessions, of our houses, of what we do with our lives. We worry about what we would think if they knew our weaknesses or mistakes. But in terms of our faith, we can be crippled by a fear of what people will think of us. So people are scared of what they are going to say if I go to the prayer meeting, or what they are going to say if I profess my faith and become a church member, or what they are going to say if we change something at church or start doing something different to reach out to our community. And the important lesson is that it's very, very easy to hesitate from doing the right thing because we're afraid of people. The spies put the fear of people ahead of the fear of God. And we all need to ask ourselves, is that a mistake that I make?

But not only were they afraid of people, secondly they were afraid of their circumstances. Look again at verse 31, they said, we are not able. They looked at their circumstances, they concluded that they did not have the strength or resources or ability to go and take possession of the land. In other words, they were crippled by the mindset that said, we can't do it. We can't do it. And it's important to recognize that that mindset is all the more astonishing given all that these people had personally experienced in the Exodus just a short time ago. They had seen the plagues in Egypt, they'd passed through the Red Sea, they'd witnessed the mighty Egyptian army being swept away, they'd stood before Mount Sinai as the whole mountain shook in the presence of God. They had seen so many incredible things and yet now just a short time later they are they are crippled by the mindset that their circumstances are insurmountable. And this is an example of how new circumstances can eclipse important memories. There are times in our

Christian experience when we feel so close to God. There's times when things happen and you think, I will never doubt again that there is a God, I will never doubt that he loves me, I will never doubt that I'm a Christian. But over time these memories fade and the pressures and challenges of life leave us struggling and doubting. And it's a reminder of why it's so important to always make sure that we take time to think and talk about all that God has done for us in the past, both in our own lives and in the history of the church. It's something that God himself does. When God deals with the Israelites in the Old Testament again and again and again he'll come up to them and he'll say, I am the God who brought you out of the land of Egypt.

He reminds them of what he had done in the past to encourage them for what they are going to do in the present. And we need to remember that because God doesn't have to do something remarkable every single day to prove to us that he is God. We can look back to the astonishing events of the church's history. We can look back to the wonderful moments of our own lives and above all else we can look back to the greatest event of all time, the resurrection of Jesus Christ. And we need to remember that it's the same God that we are following. God has not changed one bit. So don't let new circumstances eclipse your memory, eclipse out of your memory, all that God is and all that God has done. It's good to think not just of the redemptive history of the Old Testament, it's good to think of the redemptive history of your own life. Think back to how God has worked in you. They were afraid of their circumstances. So at one level the Israelites confidence seems very low. They're afraid of people, they're afraid of their circumstances. But in another way they had far too much self-confidence in their own opinion. This is the third lesson that we learn from them. If you go to the beginning of chapter four we see that although they're really intimidated by what lies before them, although they're really worried and although they're really scared, they are very very confident that they know best. And they start saying we would have been better off in Egypt. Why is God doing this? Let us choose a leader and go back. And this is a very common characteristic of humanity. We can be crippled by what's lying before us, we can feel hugely intimidated but yet at the very same time we feel very confident that we know what we should do.

[16 : 21] We have great self-confidence in our own ability to judge. And yet we should be so cautious about that because very often sometimes we can think that we should do something that is the very opposite of what we really need to be doing. Because here you have the Israelites standing on the border of the Promised Land and they're saying we'd be better off going back. Now going back to Egypt is the very opposite of what they should be doing and you think that's crazy but we do exactly the same thing. For example you find people and I've done it myself when we struggle in our faith we think to ourselves I should stay away from church. That's the opposite of what we should do.

Another example comes to the, it's in terms of the Lord's table. We think I'm not in the right place, I'm not good enough, I'm not as I should be so I'm going to stay away from the Lord's table.

Who here has stayed away from the Lord's table at some point in their lives because they felt that they're not the way that they should be. That's the opposite of what you should do. The complete opposite and when we feel insecure we look for comfort in buying something new or in diving into a relationship or in indulging in some kind of excessive immoral behaviour. These are the opposites of what we should be doing. So often we point ourselves in the wrong direction and yet we maintain a great confidence in our own judgment. I look at myself and I ask the question who is the main cause of the mistakes in my life? The answer is me. We should be careful about having too much confidence in our own opinion. Fourthly, these 10 had a distorted perspective as well as having this self-confidence that their perspective was distorted. They'd gone out to spy the land which was very much an exercise in observation, they're going to look at it but their perspective was distorted and they started to think things that were far from true.

That's highlighted by the fact that they thought that going back to Egypt would be better. It says there would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt. Now it seems almost unbelievable that they would say that because they've been slaves in Egypt and by the end of their time in Egypt the Egyptians had increased the demands upon them while at the same time limiting their resources and they were murdering the baby boys that the Israelites had and yet here they are on the doorstep of the promised land and they're saying we would be better off going back and it seems absurd and yet it's an easy mistake for us to make as well because if you become a Christian and if you follow Jesus then you are free from a huge amount of awful things. You're free from the emptiness of a life that just lives for the weekend because in Jesus you have a joy that is truly satisfying. You're free from the heart of casual and selfish relationships because God's instructions for relationship and marriage brings a security and a purity that is wonderful. You're free from the search to try and find meaning in your life because you have meaning as a disciple of Jesus.

You are his witness, his servant. You're free from loneliness and isolation because you can be part of the church. You're free from the uncertainty of what a day or a week or a year may bring because you know that God will be with you and you're free from the fear of death and you're free to look forward to all the immeasurable joys of the new creation and yet the devil comes to us and says go back, you'll be better off and if we listen to that then our perspective is badly distorted and when we feel like that we need to pray that God would open our eyes and you.

[21 : 10] Fifthly, we see in the sixth in these 10, we see the power of a wrong majority. Nowadays we often listen to the wisdom of the majority so in politics, particularly in referenda, it's the majority who are right or at least it's their decision that carries and even in wider culture the apparent majority tends to hold sway but we must never forget that sometimes the majority is wrong and that's definitely the case here. Caleb and Joshua weren't simply a minority, they were a tiny minority and yet the two were right and the 10 were wrong and we must remember that in our lives as Christians sometimes we will be in the minority, often we'll be in the minority but we must ensure that our views are shaped by scripture and not by a majority that's opposing God's word but it's difficult because it's easy to feel pressured into following a wrong majority so you might be surrounded by people who think that getting drunk is no big deal, you might be surrounded by people who think that gossiping and judging others is perfectly okay, you might be surrounded by people who do not have a problem with sex outside marriage, you might be the only person among your group of friends who regard the Bible as authoritative and even in terms of believing in God in Britain today we are in the minority but never ever forget that if the minority is biblical then the minority is right. As we've said many times in our study in Romans it's vital that we have a biblical worldview, we need to guard against following a crowd that is opposed to what God is teaching us in his word. Number six is perhaps the most tragic and serious of them all. At the heart of the Israelites failure was a suspicion of God. You see that in 14-3 why is the Lord bringing us into this land to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become a prey.

Now this is a very important point to recognize, the Israelites here were suspicious of God, they thought that God was quite happy to see them get hurt and they seemed to be thinking that that was God's plan all along. In other words they thought the worst of God and that's a problem that has plagued humanity ever since the fall when the devil came to Eve and said that God's command was actually aimed at restricting and controlling and hurting them rather than blessing them and often we can make the same mistake we can think the worst of God so people think that God's law is going to spoil their lives, people think that following God's laws, following God in their lives is going to make their life worse and that for some reason God would want that and people can think that God brings trials into our lives because somehow he likes to see us suffer. The people of Israel were suspicious of God, they thought the worst of him. Now we need to be absolutely clear, thinking the worst of God is theologically absurd, it's a blasphemy against the nature and character of God because when we are thinking the worst of God, when we are suspicious of him then we are basically accusing God of being like us because we often treat each other badly, we often have immoral motives, we often hurt people and we can even get a bit of a kick out of it sometimes. God is never ever like that, God cannot ever be like that, God is the God of truth, the God of righteousness, of holiness, of mercy and of love so God never manipulates, God never cheats, God never deceives and God never does anything other than what is best for his people so do not ever be suspicious of God. A suspicion of God arises from a totally inaccurate understanding of who God is. So these are the six errors that the 10 display, they were afraid of people, afraid of circumstances, too confident in their own judgment they had a distorted perspective, the people followed a wrong majority and they were all suspicious of God. These are all things that can be hugely damaging to a relationship with God and yet they're things that I think I've been guilty of more than once in my own life. And so we have to ask ourselves how do we avoid these? Well as we mentioned at the start one of the great emphases of this passage is the contrast between the 12, between the 10 and the 2 and Caleb and

Joshua are a great example of the godly character and attitude that we want to emulate. So for the last 10 minutes we're going to look at six lessons that we can learn from them. First of all Caleb and Joshua recognize that it is God who makes the difference in our circumstances. Notice what Caleb and Joshua say in 148, if the Lord delights in us he will bring us into this land and give it to us. Now I just want to focus on the first word in that verse, the word if. The 10 spies and the people who listened to them were full of ifs. If these people are so big, if these cities are so strong, if we are going to get beaten, if our wives and our children are going to be afraid, they're full of ifs that are holding them back and making them think there's no way we're going to do what God is telling us to do. And we can be the same if I do this for the Lord, if I go to church, if I go to the prayer meeting, if I make a mistake, if I can't keep going. All these ifs hold us back. But Caleb and Joshua are a wonderful example because they know that ultimately there is only one if that matters. If the Lord delights in us then everything else falls into place.

Paul put it slightly differently but he said exactly the same thing, if God is for us who can be against us. And that's the if that we should care about, that's the if that we should build our lives on. If we are trusting in Jesus Christ then the Lord delights in us, his favour rests upon us and that is what really matters when it comes to difficult circumstances. And so that's why if you have the Lord Jesus at the centre of your life then all the other ifs are safe in his hands.

It's God who makes the difference in our circumstances. Secondly we see that they recognise that God is able. The 10 came back and they said we are not able. Caleb stood up and he said we are.

[29 : 29] We see that in numbers 1330. He quieted in the people and he said let's go about once and occupy for we are well able to overcome it. Now notice that Caleb did not disagree that the cities were strong and that the people were big. He knew that they were but he also knew that with God with them they were able, well able to overcome. And that reminds us of a really really important question that we need to keep at the heart of everything that we do as a church. And the question is this is God able? So is God able to bring these people into the Promised Land? Is God able to bring people to faith in Carlyway? Is God able to use you as this congregation to reach the community around us? Is God able to save your friends, your family and your colleagues? Of course he is!

Of course God is able. And that's why in everything that we do as a church and everything that we do as Christians we need to have these words written on our hearts. God is able. Supposing you've been praying for someone for 30 years, God is able to answer those prayers. Made these words be written on our hearts that God is able. And if you are asking yourself the question can God save me?

Is God able? Of course he is! Of course he is! God is able. It's a vital lesson to remember.

But equally Caleb and Joshua also knew that God was with them. We see that in 148. If the Lord delights in us he will bring us into this land. The protections removed from them. The Lord is with us. Do not fear them. They knew that God was not sending them in on their own. They knew that God was going with them. That's the wonderful reminder that whatever we do for the Lord we do it with God with us. That's one of the great principles of following Jesus. If you're following Jesus he is going before you and he is going with you into every circumstance that you face.

And that's a key part of God's covenant promise. You look back into the Old Testament you read about big figures, big men like Abraham and Moses and Joshua. They had massive roles in God's redemptive plan and they all were told by God, I am with you. And it's like the seal of God's commission on great men. So God takes people, he gives them a massive task but then he gives them this seal of reassurance and he says, I am with you. And it's like the stamp of covenant promise that God is going to work through this person and accomplish his purposes. God puts this seal on these great men for these great purposes. But do you know what the amazing thing is? Jesus has done exactly the same thing with you. Because do you remember how Jesus concludes his great commission? He comes to us and he says, go and make disciples and then he says, behold, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. And so the same stamp that went on to Abraham and went on to Moses and went on to

[33 : 25] Joshua confirming the fact that they could fulfill God's covenant purpose, the same stamp is on you. Meaning that whenever you go out to serve the Lord and by that I don't simply mean particularly church focused work. When you go to work tomorrow, when you go to work as a Christian, when you go to school, when you go into the community, when you're out lambing tomorrow or whatever you're doing, you're doing it with Jesus with you so that you can be his witness and you can serve him.

So wherever you are tomorrow, at work, at college, at home, whatever you're doing, God is with you ready and able to work through you. Joshua and Caleb knew that God was with them.

But fourthly, they also teach us that God is to be obeyed. Notice what they say in verse 9, do not rebel against the Lord. It's a great reminder that God is to be obeyed. And the Israelites were not simply in danger of missing out on the blessing of the Promised Land. They were in danger of rebelling against the God of heaven and earth. And it's a solemn reminder that if God is God, that he is to be obeyed. And Caleb and Joshua are not simply protecting their own interests, they're not just saying, well, I want that land, so I want to go in there. They are not so much concerned about their own interests. First and foremost, they are concerned about the honor and worship of God. They do not want these people to rebel against the Lord.

And that's a very important thing to think about. When we are trying to serve the Lord, when we're trying to do things in our congregation, it's easy to be caught up with a concern for success, a concern for growth, for encouragement, for more numbers, that when we do something as a church, that we will see it working. And whenever we do something, we want it to work. When we want to see new people come in, we want to see top tots grow, we want to see WFM grow, we want to see the community breakfast thrive, we want to see all of these things thrive. But we must ensure that our primary concern is not for our numbers or for our reputation or even for the Free Church of Scotland.

Our great concern is not for any of those things. Our great concern is for the honor of God, that God would be obeyed, that God would be worshiped, that God would be glorified. God is God.

[36 : 20] And we love and worship Him. And like Caleb and Joshua, we want to obey Him. We want to live in His way. Caleb and Joshua recognize that God is to be obeyed. Fifthly, they recognize that God is trustworthy. Remember, at the heart of the Israelites problem was that they were suspicious of God. But here we find two men who knew that God is trustworthy. And that's something that we must never forget. It's easy to be suspicious of God, easy to think, well, you know, God's doing this because He's angry with me, God's doing this because He doesn't particularly like me, God's doing this because I deserve it, God's doing this because He just wants to see me suffer.

Never think like that, because it's never true. When you face difficult circumstances, remember that God is trustworthy. And just put your whole heart and trust in Him. So, the Caleb and Joshua knew that it was God who makes a difference. They knew that God is able. They knew that God was with them. They knew that God was to be obeyed. They knew that God was trustworthy.

And finally, they knew that God had made a promise. Back at the very start of the passage, the Lord spoke to Moses saying, Send men to spy out the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the people of Israel. Everything that Caleb and Joshua said was grounded on God's promise.

And that has vital lessons for us, both for those of us who are Christians and those of us who are maybe yet to be certain that we've come to faith in the Lord. And if that's you, if you are not yet a Christian, or if you're not sure if you are, or if you're seeking the Lord, or you're uncertain, or you're waiting for some kind of assurance, then you really need to listen to this and remember this.

That every time you hear the gospel message, every time you are told, believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved. Every time you hear that whoever comes to Jesus will never be cast out. Every time that you are told that whoever believes in him will not perish, but have eternal life. You must remember that these are not empty words of optimism. They are words that are grounded.

[39 : 02] Grounded on the unbreakable promise of God. Whoever comes to him will never be cast out. That's an unbreakable promise.

Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved. That is an unbreakable promise. Whoever believes in him will not perish, but have eternal life. That is an unbreakable promise.

And you come to God not on the basis of your success or abilities, not on the basis of getting up to a certain standard, not even on the basis of your feelings. You come to God on the basis of his promise. And that's why we just need to run to him and ask him to keep his promise to save you, because he will. And for those of us who are Christians, we also have to remember what God has promised. Has God promised to save his people? Yes, he has. Has God promised that there are still many more in this city, in this district? Yes, he has. Has God promised to be with us, enabling us to serve him and to reach out with the gospel? Yes, he has. Has God promised to use people like you to reach the world with the gospel? Yes, he has. And it does not matter one bit how big or strong or dark or skeptical or hostile or uninterested the world around us is, is because with God, we can do it. With God, we can do it. So if you go back one slide, sorry,

I should have put it up. You have 12 lessons from 12 spies. May God grant that his word is written on our hearts. Amen. Let's pray.

Our Father, we have to acknowledge that each of these lessons highlight areas where we've gone wrong in our lives, where we've been in fear of people or of circumstances, where we've trusted our own judgment, where we've had a distorted perspective, where we've gone our own way and thought that we knew best, where we've even been suspicious of you. And yet we pray, oh God, that you'd forgive us for thinking like that. And may our minds be transformed and renewed so that we would remember that you are the one who makes the difference, that you are able, you are with us, you are to obey, you are trustworthy and you have promised and you will never break your promises. So God, our Father, we pray that your word would be written on our hearts. In Jesus' name, amen.