

## **Are There Giants in Your Garden?** Numbers 13

Gardening is in my blood. On the first Sunday of this sermon series, Randy talked about my Dad's green thumb—I think it's probably more accurate to say Dad had 10 green fingers! Nearly half of the small country lot where we lived was Dad's highly productive vegetable garden—and that didn't include the strawberry patch, the raspberry bushes, or the carefully cultivated rose gardens. His garden was a traffic stopper along our country road during the late summer months.

Due to Dad's influence, my work experience as a child and teen was all garden-related. First, of course, were the weed-removal jobs in his own garden. Then, my first real job when I was in late elementary school was picking strawberries in a huge patch owned by a family friend. Then in high school and college, Dad's farming connections landed me summer jobs at OSU's agricultural research and development facility in Wooster, OH, first on the grounds crew and then in the corn research fields.

Gardening requires a willingness to get your hands—and often the rest of you—dirty. That has never been a problem for me, even from a young age, as you can see by the picture on the screen. There were, however, other obstacles to full joy in the gardening process, some "giants" that loomed up to terrorize me. When I worked in the corn lab, there was a particular field that struck fear in my heart. Most of the fields where we worked were small plots, with rows planted wide apart, so that we could move comfortably down them to do the tedious hand pollination of the experimental plants. But there was that one field. . . .It was big, and the plants were tall, and the rows were barely far enough apart for a single person to move down them. And when we worked that field, it was always first thing in the morning, when the dew was heavy and those corn leaves sliced like knives. If you've ever been in a wet corn field, you know what kind of giants lurk there on a dewy morning—8-legged, massive monsters in their horrible webs. I always hoped and prayed that someone else would have to brave that field!

Today we're remembering the time when God offered his people an entire land that was a massive, abundant garden of fruitfulness and well-being. They walked right up to the edge of that garden—and then refused to enter, because they saw “giants” in the land. This story of a people standing on the edge of the garden, afraid to enter, has a lot to say to us about God himself—his plans and desires for his people—and about the way our chosen perspective has the power to shape how (or if) we experience those good plans. There are three perspectives present in this story—the same three that confront us on a daily basis. There is God's perspective (spoken through Moses), the majority perspective, and the “minority report.”

**First, let's consider God's perspective.** This story begins, as all our stories do, with God the Gracious Initiator and Inviter. The human actions in this story come in response to a prior action of God. When the spies go out to view and evaluate the land, they are following in the footsteps of God himself. In Numbers 10:33, it is Yahweh who goes out before his people to “spy out” the places where they will camp. And now as they stand on the border of their permanent dwelling place, God offers them a clear perspective through which to assess everything they will see. He says, “Send out men to explore the land of Canaan, *the land I am giving to the Israelites*” (v. 1). This establishes the parameters of God's perspective: the land is his to give, and he is giving it (present tense!) to them.

*(NOTE: I know there are lots of challenging questions that surface in these narratives about WHY God would give Israel a land inhabited by other peoples; I've had conversations with some of you who are troubled or puzzled by these stories. If that's where you find yourself today, I'm simply going to ask you to set those particular questions aside for the next few minutes. They are legitimate questions—but they are questions for another sermon on another day! Today we want to focus on the relationship between the God of promise and the people who receive those promises.)*

The story in Numbers 13 comes in the context of God's promise to give the land to Israel, and so another question springs to mind. If the promise has been made, why is the reconnaissance mission necessary? If the divine plan is already in place, why do they need to spy out the land? It seems very clear that through this mission, God is inviting them to step into *his* perspective on their future—to trust his promise and his power. When Moses, following God's orders, sends out the 12 men to explore the land, he sets them up with a series

of assessment criteria (vs. 18–20): “See what the land is like, and whether the people who live in it are strong or weak, whether they are few or many, and whether the land they live in is good or bad, and whether the towns that they live in are unwalled or fortified, and whether the land is rich or poor, and whether there are trees in it or not” (NRSV).

The answers to these questions are already anticipated by the repeated promises of God that he was taking them to “a land flowing with milk and honey” (Exo 3:8, 17; 13:5; 33:3; Lev. 20:24). They will surely find a garden-land that is pleasant and fertile, with lush forests and richly productive farmland. Oh, and if they also happen to discover strong, numerous inhabitants and fortified cities there, the lens through which they are to view them is the sure promise of God. **This is a faith-building foray**, and the great question that looms over their mission is this: **Will they trust God?** Will they allow his perspective to shape theirs?

LENTEN connection: In this Lenten season, I believe we face the same kind of foray into faith. God has set before us a grand vista of abundant life, a landscape watered by the great rushing river of the Spirit. As we stand on the edge of that landscape and see that the entrance to our abundant garden is darkened by the looming shadow of a cross, will we still trust the goodness of God’s plan for us and his power to bring us into that promised land?

Now we turn to the second perspective in this story, what we might call **the “majority report.”** This is the assessment of the future that is driven by “common sense” and shaped wholly by human evaluation of the situation.

The twelve men sent out by Moses faithfully carry out their reconnaissance, taking time to view the full scope of the land from south to north. They get an eye-full of the truth of God’s perspective, and at the end of their time in Canaan, their report to Moses and the people starts out as an affirmation: “We entered the land you sent us to explore and it is indeed a bountiful country—a land flowing with milk and honey” (v. 27). Embedded within the story of their 40-day mission are two little details that seem like almost playful hints from God to remind them that they can trust this vision of abundant life. First, when Moses instructs them to bring back some of the fruit of the land, the story-teller inserts this editorial comment: “Now it was the season of the first ripe grapes” (v. 20). The first hint of harvest, not the height of the season—a time when they might sensibly expect to find a few samples of fruit in the vineyards. But what they actually discover is extravagant

abundance at an unexpected time: “When they came to valley of Eshcol, they cut down a branch with a single cluster of grapes so large that it took two of them to carry it on a pole between them!” (v. 23). The picture is almost comic. It’s as if God is saying to them, as they hefted the weight of the evidence onto their shoulders, “Don’t set the bar of your expectations to human standards—trust *me!*”

The second little nudge God gives them is their visit to the flourishing city of Hebron in the north. It is here that the clash of perspectives—human vs. divine—begins to take hold of the story. Hebron was the burial place of Israel’s patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the original recipients of the divine promises. It was a city, therefore, that stood as a witness to God’s faithfulness. God had promised to make Abraham’s name great and to turn his little family into a great nation—and here, after nearly five centuries, stood twelve representatives of that million-plus-member nation, casting their eyes down upon great-great-great-grandfather Abraham’s burial plot. God had kept his word to Abraham! However, there is a very telling moment in the description of Hebron in this story. When Abraham’s descendants describe Hebron, it is not as the city “of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob”; instead they call it the place of Ahiman, Sheshai, and Talmi, the current inhabitants who seem like descendants of a giant (vs. 22, 28). Even as these men stand surrounded by evidence of God’s past faithfulness and present provision, they turn away from God’s perspective to look with wholly human eyes.

Their report reveals that they are firmly anchored in that limited perspective that views both the present and the future through an exclusively human lens. Did you notice how their report begins? They say to Moses, “We entered the land you sent us to explore” (v. 27), rather than “the land the Lord is giving us” (cf. v. 2). They have left God’s perspective out of their vision of the garden-land, which explains the conclusions they draw. Verse 28 opens with that little word “but,” which is a very emphatic little expression in Hebrew, and it is the crux of their perspective. They say, in essence, “Yep, this is a delightfully good place, just like God promised, BUT” [in all caps]. In that “but” is the choice they have made. Against all the evidence that God’s promises are true, they deliberately choose fear instead of faith, timidity instead of trust. “The land is good, BUT. . . we are terrified of the ‘giants’ living there. They make us feel like grasshoppers!” (vs. 28, 33).

LENTEN connection: As we walk through this Lenten season, on the journey to resurrection hope and a future that is secured by the same power that raised Jesus from the dead, what is the “but” in your perspective? Where are fear and timidity making you turn aside from God’s view of reality?

**Finally, we come to the “minority report,”** given by only two voices out of twelve, Caleb and Joshua (although only Caleb is mentioned in Numbers 13). Only 16 percent of those who saw the abundant garden-land challenge the majority report. Caleb argues, “Let’s go up at once to take the land. We can certainly conquer it!” (v. 30). Caleb saw the same numerous inhabitants, the same walled cities, the same “giants in the land” that the other spies had seen—and yet he came to a very different conclusion. Where the majority said, “We can’t!”, Caleb said, “We can!” Where the majority focused on the obstacles, Caleb focused on the God of promise who had brought them to this point. What made the difference? How was Caleb able to see those giants so differently? Numbers 14:24 gives us the answer. When God exempts Caleb from the punishment that the rest of that faithless generation would pay, he says, “But my servant Caleb has a different attitude than the others have. He has remained loyal to me, so I will bring him into the land he explored” (NLT). And the beautiful *Message* version reads: “But my servant Caleb—this is a different story! He has a different spirit; he follows me passionately.”

All twelve spies agreed on the two basic facts: (1) the garden-land was amazingly good, and (2) there were giants in the land. The key difference, as one commentator puts it, was “where to put the ‘but’ in their reports.”<sup>1</sup> The majority report said, “The land is wonderful, BUT. . . we can’t handle the giants.” That “but” said God either wasn’t big enough or good enough to bring them into the promised land. They failed the trust test. Caleb and Joshua’s report also had a “but”—but it was located at a different place! Joshua’s version of the minority report is found in Numbers 14:7–9: “*The land we traveled through and explored is a wonderful land! And if the Lord is pleased with us, he will bring us safely into that land and give it to us. It is a rich land flowing with milk and honey. [BUT] do not rebel against the Lord, and don’t be afraid of the people of the land. They are only helpless prey to us! They have no protection, but the Lord is with us! Don’t be afraid of them!*” (NLT). This “but” said that the giants were big, but God was bigger; it said that fear could be

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<sup>1</sup> Iaian M. Duguid, *Numbers: God’s Presence in the Wilderness*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), 169.

replaced with faith, timidity with trust. The minority report was based not on “common sense” or human assessment, but on the perspective of God.

**So, where does this narrative intersect with our lives, especially as we find ourselves journeying through Lent?** Let me suggest some “garden-lands” that God may be calling us to explore during this season, landscapes that may include the looming shadow of giants. In each case, we are faced with the same choice that the twelve spies faced: faith or fear, trust or timidity.

- **Salvation.** Perhaps this Lenten journey is the first time you’ve ever risked following after God. Maybe you’ve heard that God is setting before you through Jesus a new kind of life, a life of forgiveness, grace, and restoration of your brokenness. You want that kind of life like you’ve never wanted anything before—but standing squarely in your path is the Cross. The giant you must face is death to self—repentance and the willing submission of your life to the lordship of Jesus. Human wisdom says, “Don’t risk it! Don’t let anyone else take charge of your life!” Divine wisdom invites you to entrust yourself into the gracious hands of the One who loved you enough to send his only Son to die in your place.
- **Spirit-filled life.** Maybe you’ve been walking with Jesus for a while—maybe even a long while. But in this Lenten season you sense him calling you to a deeper plunge into the river of the Spirit. You sense that there is more, an abundance of the presence and power of God that you’ve never known, and your heart yearns after it. But standing in your way is the giant of relinquishment—giving up control, letting go, and letting God do what he will, when he will, and how he will. Human wisdom says, “Don’t risk it! Who knows what crazy, weird thing might happen?” Divine wisdom invites you to throw yourself into the embrace of the One who desires to fill you up to all the fullness of Christ.
- **Risky obedience.** Perhaps there is a very specific task that you sense God calling you to do or a specific step he is asking you to take. Responding in obedience would lead you squarely toward the giant of the unknown. Human wisdom says, “Don’t risk it! Play it safe; just deal with the realities you already know.” Divine wisdom invites you to step boldly into the place where God is calling you, knowing that he is already there.

If the Spirit is calling you to conquer a giant today, whether in these areas or in some other aspect of your walk with God, and you are willing to exchange fear for faith and timidity for trust, then I invite you to respond in a very concrete way. During the final hymn, just come down and stand or sit in these front rows, as a public indication that you are ready to follow God even into the promised garden-land, giants or no giants! If you would like someone to pray with you, just raise your hand and one of the pastors will come and pray.