

The 40-Year-Long Nightmare

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The book of Numbers is boring for a lot of people. It's basically about counting how many Israelites left Egypt with Moses and then giving those people some rules to live by. But buried in the middle of all those numbers and rules are explanations of why Jewish history played out the way it did. If you ever wondered why the Israelites were stuck in the desert for 40 years—and how they made it even worse on themselves—you can find it here! This story comes from Numbers 13 and 14.

When Moses and the Israelites finally reached the land of Canaan,
the land God had promised to give to Abraham and his descendants,
God told Moses to pick twelve men to go explore the land
before the people entered it.

Moses chose one man from each of the twelve tribes
and told them, "Go into the Promised Land and be our spies!

Learn everything you can about it:

How many people live there?

Are they strong or weak?

Are the towns surrounded by walls?

Does the land grow good crops?

Are there lots of trees?

And be sure to bring back samples of the foods that grow there."

So the twelve spies went into Canaan
and for 40 days they roamed the land
from one end to the other—
from north to south, and east to west;
from plains to rivers, and mountains to deserts.

And on the way back they stopped to gather fruit.

They cut down a cluster of grapes so big

it took two men to carry it!

And they also gathered figs and pomegranates,

and brought them all back to the waiting Israelites.

But that's not all the spies brought back.

Ten of them brought back a BAD ATTITUDE as well!

"We found a land of milk and honey," the spies told the people,

"but it's too dangerous for us to go there.

That land is full of GIANTS!

Their cities are big and the walls are thick

and we looked like grasshoppers next to those giants!

We can't go there! We'll all be killed!"

But one of the spies, named Caleb, said, "What's wrong with you?
God told us to take that land, and look at all He's done for us!
These giants can't stop us when God is on our side!"

"What are you talking about?" the people said.
"Are you crazy? Do you want us to die? We can't do this!
No, we're going to pick a new leader and go back to Egypt!"

Then Moses and the priest, Aaron,
and the other two spies, Joshua and Caleb,
begged the people not to disobey God.
"We can conquer this land!" they said.
But the people wouldn't listen.
They even got ready to stone Joshua and Caleb!

That's when God decided this had to stop.
He appeared above the Tent of Worship as a huge glowing light,
the same one the people saw every night since they'd left Egypt.
And He said to Moses, "These people have done nothing but complain
since I brought them out of Egypt. I'd had ENOUGH of them!
I'm going to destroy these ungrateful people, Moses,
and I'll give the Promised Land to you instead!"

But Moses begged God not to do it.
"What will the other nations think of You," Moses said,
"if you rescued this people just to destroy them?
Please, forgive them!"

So God listened to Moses, because He considered Moses His friend.
"Because YOU asked, Moses, I will do as you wish...
But these ungrateful people will NEVER enter My Promised Land.
They will all die here in the desert—
all of them except Joshua and Caleb, because they trust Me—
and I'll give the land to their children after they're all gone.
Perhaps their children will trust Me!"

So Moses told the Israelites what God said, and they were very sad...
but they didn't really believe Him.

The very next morning the Israelites got up
and packed all their things for a journey.
Moses asked them, "What are you doing?"
And they said, "We know we made a mistake but we're sorry.
So now we're going to go take that land, just like God told us to!"

And all Moses could do is shake his head.

"Are you going to disobey God AGAIN? He already told you
to go back to the wilderness! Please don't do this!"

But the people were determined to do things THEIR way...
and before they could even enter the land,
they ran into giants from the Promised Land.
Those giants chased them back to the wilderness!

So the Israelites didn't enter the Promised Land after all.
Instead, they spent 40 years wandering in the wilderness
and not even their children could go in
until all the disobedient adults had died.

But do you know the saddest part of the story?

Forty years later, when Joshua sent two more spies
into the land to learn about the city of Jericho,
the new spies learned that the Canaanites were terrified of the Israelites
and had been ever since God led them out of Egypt!
If the Israelites had just listened to Moses and Caleb,
they might not have met with much resistance at all
and those 40 years could have been very different.

Things could have been VERY different if they had only trusted God...