

## Walking by Faith: Taking on the Giants

[Numbers 13:1-3, 13:25-33](#)

Dr. M. Craig Barnes

Sunday, November 4, 2001

[Real Audio \(3 MB\)](#)

They say that life is a series of choices. That may be true, but all the important choices boil down to voting for either your fear or your faith.

It has been two years now since the Hebrews left slavery in Egypt. These have been two long hard years of walking through the desert, chasing a promise from God that they would someday reach the Promised Land. The reason the road to the Promised Land is always hard is that it is the road on which we are being changed into men and women of faith. We don't learn faith on Easy Street.

The faith we are learning on the hard road is not faith in ourselves, but in the faithfulness of God. It was the faithfulness of God that parted the waters of the Red Sea and miraculously provided water and food in the desert. It was also the faithfulness of God that forgave the people's faithlessness along the way. Step by step, day after day, the people received one reminder after another that they could count on God to be faithful.

The lessons of faith are cumulative. Each builds upon those preceding it. In other words, God expects us to learn our lessons along the way, because the challenges down the road only increase, and it will take more and more faith to overcome them. Maybe the greatest challenges of all stand right at the gate to the Promised Land.

Perhaps like the Hebrews you have been in the wilderness a long time now. Maybe your work has been so dull and unfulfilling that it feels like you've just been wandering around in this desert called your career for a long time. Or maybe your health is chronically bad, or your heart is chronically broken and the grief has sent you on a long journey. You didn't get into the wilderness because you wanted to be there. Nobody chooses the hard road through the desert. You were placed on that road in order to be changed.

The greatest change that occurs on the hard road is you learn to depend only on God. No longer are you a slave to the old dependencies. You don't count on money or success to get you through any more, because that's what you lost out in the desert. Now you are counting only on God, and that is what makes you free. And freedom is your ticket to the Promised Land.

God never asks anyone to stay in the wilderness. The only purpose of the journey is to get to the other side as a changed person. Eventually the time comes to leave the hard road and enter the Promised Land. So the last thing you ever want to do is get used to the wilderness.

After two years of the desert journey, God has finally brought the Hebrews to Kadesh Barnea, the southern gate to the Promised Land. The Lord told Moses to send twelve of his leaders as spies into the land. "The land," God said, "that I am giving to the Israelites." Forty days later these men returned from their intelligence gathering mission. They brought back pomegranates, figs, and a single cluster of grapes that was so big they had to carry it on a pole between two men.

Ten of the spies said, "This is a land that flows with milk and honey. But it is also a land that devours its inhabitants. There we saw the Nephilim, a race of giants, and we seemed to ourselves like grasshoppers." At this point the other two spies, Joshua and Caleb objected and said, "Giants? Giants? Don't be afraid of the giants! Remember the name of this place is PROMISED land. What do we care about the Nephilim, if God has promised to give us the land?"

But the people decided to go with the majority report. "And all the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron; 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. . .' So they said to one another, 'Let us choose a captain and go back to Egypt' (14:1-2,4). God has been burning people up along the journey for saying this kind of thing. It's amazing the people would have the nerve to complain again. But never underestimate what fear can make people do.

What did Joshua and Caleb see that no one else did? The promise. That changed everything. It changed the way they saw the giants, and more importantly, it changed the way they saw themselves. They didn't waste the experience of the hard road. They had been paying attention over the last two years, learning the lessons of faith, and it changed them. Going back to Egypt simply wasn't an option, because these two men were not slaves any longer. That's because they believed the promise. In that belief they were changed from grasshoppers to giant slayers.

Nothing will shape your identity more than the promises you believe. We live in a society that keeps telling us that our identity is determined by our vocation, our experiences, or maybe our relationships. But the Bible claims that your identity is determined mostly by the promises you take to heart. The promises shape your vision of reality. They fill your heart with courage or with fear. It all depends on which promise you believe.

If the promise you believe is that you are on your own to make what you can of life, and on your own to get out of the wilderness, then when you stumble onto the giants, you had better be afraid. Washington is a city that devours its inhabitants, and you are just a grasshopper. By contrast, if you are trusting the promise God has made you, that you are his beloved child who was created for a sacred purpose, then when you run across the giants, you may still have some fear. But your fear will be beside the point, because this isn't about you. The giant isn't in your way. It's in God's way, and they don't make giants big enough to keep God from getting what he wants. But you have to realize, that if it is God's promise you are pursuing there will always be giants in the way.

This is never more true than when we start to inherit the promises of Jesus Christ that a new kingdom is coming. This is a kingdom of peace and justice, a kingdom where you can go to work without worry that your mail may kill you. It's a kingdom where planes aren't hijacked and flown into crowded office buildings. And it's a kingdom where love, not terror, reigns. Today standing between that kingdom and us are some giant reasons to be afraid. So are you going to sell out and move to the desert? Or are you going to take on the giants by refusing to be afraid? It's your choice. But remember, if you are acting on fear, it is only because you chose that. You could have chosen faith.

Today is the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church. Two hundred thousand churches around the world are praying today for those who are being persecuted for calling Jesus Christ their Lord and Savior. Scholar and human rights advocate Paul Marshall estimates that 200 million Christians are being persecuted today with physical abuse, confiscation of property, and incarceration. 400 million are being discriminated against because of their faith in Christ. But still the persecuted church continues to grow. That's because it refuses to be enslaved by fear.

We have heard quite a bit lately about the "terrorist cells" scattered around the world, waiting for an opportunity to bring violence to the nations where they live. We have not heard as much about the persecuted church, which is also scattered around the world as "cells of hope," waiting for an opportunity to bring faith to their tormentors. One of the greatest reasons to be optimistic about our future is that these cells of hope will be used by God to overcome tyranny, as he has done so often in the past. There are so many giant reasons for the persecuted church to turn and run. But it doesn't. It can't. Because it believes in the promise of a new kingdom coming.

It doesn't matter if you are a Pakistani believer sitting in a funeral grieving the sixteen Christians who were just murdered, or a believer sitting in National Presbyterian Church wondering about your own part of the world and your own life. To call yourself a believer is to bet your life on the promises of God. But, again, that necessarily means you'll encounter a giant at the gateway to those promises.

The inverse of this is also true. If all you've got are little dreams that are easily managed and never threatened, then they are clearly not the dreams of God. If you have cut a deal with the giants and told yourself, "The world is a harsh place so I'll just tend my garden," then you have just dealt yourself right out of the promises of God who never settles for how it is.

Of course, it may appear foolish to take on the giants. Ten out of twelve people surveyed would say the presence of giants is a sign that you should turn around. But like Joshua and Caleb, the mission of the church is to be the minority report that proclaims the hidden truth of what God can do. In the words of Flannery O'Connor, "You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you odd." Amen to that. We in the church are the odd, distinctive people who know the hidden truth that nothing can stand for long between God and what he has promised.

So here you are at the border of the Promised Land today. Behind you is just a whole lot of desert and slavery beyond that. Ahead of you are the promises of God and the truth that he is faithful to deliver them. Now you have to make a choice. Will you affirm the giants or the promise, the fear or faith? You have to choose. As the conclusion of this story makes clear, God will honor your choice.

When the Hebrews chose not to enter the Promised Land because they were too afraid, God said, "Okay. You can stay in the desert. I'll bring your children into the land." God will permit you to keep wandering in the wilderness as a victim of your fears if that is what you choose. But it's not what God wants. The kingdom will still come. If this generation does not rise to their opportunity, God will wait for the next. As history reveals, clearly he is not in a hurry. But you have to know that this is your moment to choose faith.

There is a wonderful epilogue to this otherwise sad story. Thirty-eight years after everyone who voted against entering the land had died in the wilderness, Joshua and Caleb led the next generation into the Promised Land. We don't hear too much about Caleb after that, except for one brief reference. After they finally crossed into the land, we're told old Caleb fought against the giant Nephilim, and he defeated them.

O Lord, mold and shape us until we are born anew as a people who live by your holy promises. Amen.