

A Sure Foundation

Numbers 13:26-14:9; 14:36-45

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Many of us live in homes, and those homes we spend a lot of time in. We decorate them. We mow the lawns. We repaint, fill them with furniture. We laugh together, cry together, pray together, argue with each other inside those homes. One of the things we rarely pay attention to is the foundation of the house. So long as everything's holding together, it's great. We rarely go to the basement, if at all. We're not really looking at the sturdiness of the walls or how they're doing. Everything goes well until that foundation is tested. We receive a lot of rain, shifting soil. That's when our foundations are tested. Then we begin to really think about our foundation.

During the housing boom all over the South, the housing boom was taking off in places like Georgia, South Carolina, and North Carolina. Ten years later, however, there are many seasons of draught, particularly in Georgia, and seasons of rain. Those houses which were built quickly with such beauty and grandeur, then about eight to ten years old, began to show stress in the foundation. But nobody realized it. They weren't thinking about the foundation. The houses started making very weird sounds—creaking. And then it began to show in the walls. And then things started falling off the walls. And many would call in specialists. They would begin to see that these houses which were built with such beauty and grandeur were not built properly on the right kind of foundation. The least sexiest part of your house is sometimes the most important. But you don't know it, often, until it's stressed.

The nation of Israel is getting ready to go through a time of real stress. We're in the Book of Numbers this week, looking at what God was going to do—send them into the Promised Land. But beforehand, he said, I want you to take a group of people, one representing each tribe, twelve in all, to go and scout out the land for forty days. Come back and report on everything that you see, for this is the land I'm going to give you. And here, from this, we would see just what kind of strength the foundation would be. Hear now God's Word, Numbers 13:26-33, and then, because this is such a long section, I'll read the summary points, and then Number 14:1-9.

They came back to Moses and Aaron and the whole Israelite community at Kadesh in the Desert of Paran. There they reported to them and to the whole assembly and showed them the fruit of the land. They gave Moses this account: "We went into the land to which you sent us, and it does flow with milk and honey! Here is its fruit. But the people who live there are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large. We even saw descendants of Anak there. The Amalekites live in the Negev; the Hittites, Jebusites and Amorites live in the hill country; and the Canaanites live near the sea and along the Jordan." Then Caleb silenced the people before Moses and said, "We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it." But the men who had gone up with him said, "We can't attack those people; they are stronger than we are." And they spread among the Israelites a bad report about the land they had explored. They said, "The land we explored devours those living in it. All the people we saw there are of great size. We saw the Nephilim there (the descendants of Anak come from the Nephilim). We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them." [13:26-33]

That night all the people of the community raised their voices and wept aloud. All the Israelites grumbled against Moses and Aaron, and the whole assembly said to them, "If only we had died in Egypt! Or in this desert! Why is the LORD bringing us to this land only to let us fall by the sword? Our wives and children will be taken as plunder. Wouldn't it be better

for us to go back to Egypt?” And they said to each other, “We should choose a leader and go back to Egypt.” Then Moses and Aaron fell facedown in front of the whole Israelite assembly gathered there. Joshua son of Nun and Caleb son of Jephunneh, who were among those who had explored the land, tore their clothes and said to the entire Israelite assembly, “The land we passed through and explored is exceedingly good. If the LORD is pleased with us, he will lead us into that land, a land flowing with milk and honey, and will give it to us. Only do not rebel against the LORD. And do not be afraid of the people of the land, because we will swallow them up. Their protection is gone, but the LORD is with us. Do not be afraid of them.” [14:1-9]

So the men Moses had sent to explore the land, who returned and made the whole community grumble against him by spreading a bad report about it—these men responsible for spreading the bad report about the land were struck down and died of a plague before the LORD. Of the men who went to explore the land, only Joshua son of Nun and Caleb son of Jephunneh survived. When Moses reported this to all the Israelites, they mourned bitterly. Early the next morning they went up toward the high hill country. “We have sinned,” they said. “We will go up to the place the LORD promised.” But Moses said, “Why are you disobeying the LORD’s command? This will not succeed! Do not go up, because the LORD is not with you. You will be defeated by your enemies, for the Amalekites and Canaanites will face you there. Because you have turned away from the LORD, he will not be with you and you will fall by the sword.” Nevertheless, in their presumption they went up toward the high hill country, though neither Moses nor the ark of the LORD’s covenant moved from the camp. Then the Amalekites and Canaanites who lived in that hill country came down and attacked them and beat them down all the way to Hormah. [14:36-45]

This is the Word of God. Thanks be to God. Will you pray with me?

Father, I now pray that you would open the eyes of our hearts, that we might apprehend your glory, your power, and the grace of your promise. For you are the One who justifies. You are the One who has given us the promise of deliverance. You are our Foundation, O Lord. Help us, then, to live out of that promise, that sure foundation, that what you say and what you see is greater than what we see, what others may think. For you are our Foundation. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

So what we see happening in this passage as they have now been in the land for roughly three months or so—they have experienced God’s provision, God’s promise, God’s power of being freed from the Egyptians. The Red Sea has been parted, and now they’re in the Sinai desert. Now they’re being told to go into the Promised Land. And they’re told to take these explorers and go and investigate and bring back this report. What happens as a result of these reports demonstrates so much of what they believed about themselves, what they believed about God. And it is instructive for us to use and to at least ask the question, where are we in regard to God’s promises? What do we believe? May the Lord enable us to ask these questions. But what we will do is we will first look at God’s promise, the deep divide that this report comes and brings, and then proper foundation. God’s promise, deep divide, proper foundation.

First, God’s promise. Because this passage stretches over a couple, three chapters, it would be hard to brief through it all and still be here in enough time, so let me give you a quick summary of what God’s promise is. God’s promise that leads into this exploration is one first of deliverance. He says to them, “I have brought you out of the land of Egypt, freeing you from your enslavement, as a people that I have called my own. I have done so by my hand and my power. I freed you from Pharaoh. I brought you out of that land burdened with the riches of my grace, and I gave you freedom through the leading through the Red Sea. I crushed your enemies, and now I have brought you into this desert. And now I tell you that your deliverance is sure. I’m going to lead you into this Promised Land.”

And what's interesting, if you read through the whole context of the story—the grapes that they bring back are so massive and so rich, it takes two men and a pole to carry them. The riches of the fruit and honey and all that is there is so incredible, it's beyond our wildest dreams. Perhaps you can imagine a rich meal, because perhaps you're going to have one in a few hours. It's like the most massive of buffets on a cruise ship. It's everything you ever wanted and more. And they bring that back. That is a picture of what was to be to them God's provision and God's deliverance.

What's interesting from the very beginning that must be remembered is this—that God's promise of deliverance is never at any point along their journey from Egypt to the Promised Land at any point based on who they are as a nation. God's deliverance was always based on who he was, not who they were. They were the smallest of nations. They were pitied by other nations. They were barely a nation. They were an enslaved people, under the thumb of Egypt. And even through the leadership of Moses, though God gave his promise, it would mean that they would still face great trial, because at every point that Moses obeyed and was going to lead the people in deliverance out of Egypt, things got worse and worse and worse for them. Their reaction here is much like what their reaction was to Moses in Egypt. At every point that he gave the promise of God's deliverance, things seemed to get worse, and they got mad at Moses. And he kept saying over and over again as both a prophet and a priest and a shepherd—God will deliver you. Even though you are sinners, God will deliver you—not because of what you have done, but because of who he is.

Secondly, God's promise not only seen in his promise of deliverance. Based on who he is, he ratifies it—by doing what? He ratifies it through this great work of justification. It isn't just that he picked out Israel and said, okay, I'm going to be good to you. I'm going to give you these promises. He has to demonstrate it through what they learn to celebrate in Egypt. It is the Passover. And in the Passover, just before God sets them free under the hands of Pharaoh, what he does is he comes in judgment over the nation of Egypt. And he says, but, those who belong to me must also demonstrate that they belong to me, and they must be covered by the blood.

And this is precisely what happens in the Passover. They offer a sacrifice, and they take the blood of an innocent lamb, and they put it over the doorframes of their homes. And that blood was to be a sign not of their righteousness, but because of God's righteous covering. And by that blood, they would be marked out. It was to be a sign not of their righteousness, but God's justifying work.

Now, what does that justifying work mean? Does it mean that the nation of Israelites go from being a nation of sinners to being a nation of not being sinners? No. Nothing changes in their hearts. What changes is how God views them. His justification becomes the lens through which he views them. His promise of deliverance is ratified, signified, by the blood, that through the blood they would be marked out as his own. Do you see? This is a deeply biblical theme, because it would be this very theme that Paul would say, Christ is our Passover lamb.

We'll be looking at this next week in the justifying work of Christ as it is spelled out in the Book of Galatians. But to telescope here, this is precisely what that Passover is pointing to—God's deliverance of a group of sinners, not because of who they are, but because of who he is. And he does it through his righteousness, by his rightness and justice, and he does it through the blood by changing his view of them. They are still sinners, but he is the righteous God—the justifying God—who draws them to himself.

Now, just before, just chapters before, they are sent out. They've now been in the Sinai desert eighteen days. They arrive there in the second day of the second month. And so here they've been there eighteen days. Twelve days into being in the Sinai desert, do you know what they're called to do? To celebrate the Passover. Why? It was to be a remembrance of God's deliverance out of Egypt and of his justifying work. This was God's promise—that they know it's not based on them. It's on God's promise. And so they are sent out.

So what happens next is the deep divide. The reports come back. And in working together and talking this through over the last couple of weeks with my friend, Dr. Mike Metzger, we were talking about this passage and how it does, in fact, jump out. There are these two reports. There's the good report, and there's the bad report. And these reports bring deep divide among God's people.

First, the good report. The good report comes from two out of twelve. Twenty percent. Not great numbers, but twenty percent, report the following: we can do this. Why? Because God says he will deliver them into our hands. Here's what is key. They see the exact same thing as the eighty percent. They see the same people. They see the same fruit. They see the same challenges. They see the same opportunities. And in this good report, it's not as though Caleb and Joshua don't recognize the danger or the hard work that's going to require. They're still going to have to go to battle. They still see that. They still see the hard work. They still see the temptation. But Joshua and Caleb avoid two things. They avoid overconfidence. They avoid an overconfidence that would in some way lead them to say, well, this is just sort of going to be like Kevin the Young in his book, "Good News We Almost Forgot" when he says, they're not saying going into the Promised Land is like being in a Lazyboy with a good massage and more food than you can possibly imagine. They recognize they would have to go to battle.

But what they did do is, instead of going into overconfidence, they found rest in God's promised victory. That is precisely what they announce. They announce to God's people, we can surely do this. We will be able to have victory over this people. He silenced them. "We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it." What's interesting is this. Not only do they avoid an overconfidence—they have an honest understanding of what they're going into—but they have an honest self-assessment. It's not that Joshua's looking at the situation going, we're a mighty people. No. They see that God is the one who is mighty. They recognize that they're in a weak position, but what makes them strong is who God is, that God will go before them. In fact, that is precisely what he tells them: "I will go up before you." And he will be the one who delivers. They did not get here on their own, and they will not receive the Promised Land on their own. God's deliverance, his righteous deliverance, will be the way in which they enjoy the Promised Land. You see, they rest in the promise of God. In the midst of challenge, in the midst of great difficulty, even in the face of great temptation, recognizing their own sin, Joshua and Caleb are simultaneously able to recognize their own weakness, but God's strength. Therefore, their appropriation of God's promise is richer, it's sweeter, it's deeper, and it's far more honest.

But that was twenty percent. It's the eighty percent report that becomes the problem, and that's the bad report. Again, the ten spies didn't see different things than Joshua and Caleb. They saw the same thing. So why is there a contrast, then? It's because they're doubting God's promises. And when they doubt God's promise, they become very insecure. They become very insecure. They become insecure because of what other people think of them, and even what they think of themselves. It's right there in verse thirty-three. It says, "We saw the Nephilim there (the descendants of Anak come from the Nephilim). We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them."

What did they see? They saw the same thing Caleb and Joshua did, but they saw how big the people were, and what did they immediately do? They immediately use their perspective, and they elevate it as the perspective—the lens through which they see reality. And then they see these people really big, and they go, no way. We are like grasshoppers. So they become incredibly insecure. And then what's interesting, it says—not only did they appear insecure and like grasshoppers in their own eyes. It says, "We looked the same to them." Again, my friend Mike, in an email exchange, said, "Isn't that amazing? They believe that their enemies saw them as grasshoppers."

Why is that? It's that oftentimes, what we're thinking, what we're feeling, shows on our face. It shows in our eyes. Malcolm Gladwell, in his 2006 book called *Blink* says this, that "the face is an enormously rich source of information about emotion." In fact, he makes an even bolder claim, one central to understanding how the mind reading works, and that is, "The information on our face is not just a signal of what is going on inside our mind. It is, in a certain sense, what is going on inside our mind."

Emotion can also start on the face. The face is not a secondary billboard for our internal feelings. It is an equal partner in the emotional process.”

I saw an internet meme going around this week. It was by Harvard Business School, and it was this picture of this guy’s eyes. And they’re like a certain part of his eye skull things, and they have us guess, what is the person thinking? And it gives you a list of things to choose from. And you have to guess. The whole point is, what we’re thinking, what we’re feeling, what we believe, shows on our face. These ten spies were showing it. We seemed like grasshoppers to ourselves, and we seemed that way to them. What that’s demonstrating is this—when we doubt God’s promises, we are inherently in an insecure position. And when we are, we care more about how we view ourselves and how others view us more than how we believe God views us. And when that happens, we become like waves on the ocean tossed to and fro. This was important even for the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 4:3, “I do not care what others think of me. I do not care what you think of me. Indeed, I do not care what I even think of myself. For I have a clear conscience.” But is the clear conscience what justifies me? No. It is what God sees of me. It is what God believes of me.

It is God’s justification that matters. And when we remove ourselves from that foundation, we become insecure. In fact, more than insecure—just underneath what’s outside—we’re trying to put forth a strong external reality. We’re really tempted to do that in church. We play the religious game. We look like we’re doing better than we are, but just underneath the surface is a guilt-ridden soul. How do I know that? It’s right here. This jumped out at me in the passage. What happens at the end? That insecurity of how they view themselves and being overly concerned about how they view themselves and how other people view them leads to a guilt-ridden life. Why? Because you’re trying to make everything better. You’re trying to look better before others, before yourself, and before God. How do I know that happens? It’s right here. Maybe you passed over it. Maybe my poor reading messed it up. So here it is again:

Of the men who went to explore the land, only Joshua son of Nun and Caleb son of Jephunneh survived. When Moses reported this to all the Israelites, they mourned bitterly. Early the next morning they went up toward the high hill country. “We have sinned,” they said. “We will go up to the place the LORD promised.

Now, how is that being guilt-ridden? That is precisely the definition of being guilt-ridden. They recognize that they have sinned before God, and instead of repenting and resting in the promise of God and staying put, they’re trying to make up for their failures. See, God? Now we’ll do it. See? We’ll go up. We can do it. We can go. And Moses says, don’t do it. Don’t do it—God is not with you.

And here’s what’s amazing about a guilt-ridden soul. Not only do we try to make things better in our own eyes and try to look better before other people’s eyes, try to make it up before God’s eyes—in going up to the land without God’s presence, even with the warning of Moses, they believe that they know better than God. Underneath it is pride. A guilt-ridden soul can also be a great source of pride, because I believe I can do it. I’ll make it better. But indeed, what happens as a result is they are defeated. When we try to do what only God can do, when we try to justify ourselves, to cover our nakedness, to cover our sin, to make up for our shame, the Lord is not in that. He wants us to rest. He wanted them to repent and to stop doing. He wanted them to have a proper foundation.

What is that proper foundation? First, two questions. When was the last time you asked someone close to you who knows your face well, have you asked them, what do you see in my face? What story is my life telling? If you are a Christian, and we believe and say we believe in the justification of Christ, the righteousness of God, asking a question like that will expose our weakness.

This happened to me recently. It was on vacation. It was an argument over a lost key. The day before, I had misplaced my wallet. Kate was worried, as she should be. The next day—after I found my wallet within five minutes, after worrying her to death—the next day, she couldn’t find a key. And I was sure without even thinking about it, I had nothing to do with that. And the first millisecond response was,

I got nothing to do with that. I had a little swagger. I was like, hey, let me tell you something. I knew about the wallet. I got nothing to do with that key. I didn't have it last. The implication being, Lord forgive me, maybe it was you. I didn't say that. Man, she saw right through that. Guess who had the key? I did. Right?

But here's beyond that moment of recognizing I am not the key master. She decided to, by God's grace, go down into the basement of my heart. And she said this question: on your face and in your tone, why is it, in a millisecond, did you run to defensiveness? Even yesterday, after we already discussed misplacing your wallet, why couldn't you just say, maybe I had it last—let me see if I can find it. Instead, you wanted nothing to do with it. What was on my face? What was on my face is, I was trying to justify and to cover my weakness. And when I did it, I sinned against her, I sinned against the Lord, and I had to do real work there. And we had a very good conversation, thanks be to God's grace through my wife. But it led me to ask this question: what's in your tone? What's in your face? What doctrine, what promises, are you relying on?

Finally, renewal. You see, this whole passage is pointing to a greater Moses, to a greater Passover, to a greater Promised Land. And that is Christ Jesus. That is the salvation and deliverance that we receive through the blood of the Lamb of Passover, Christ Jesus, whose active obedience took him to the cross. And that obedience is our righteousness. It was there as a lead passage this morning in the service. He became sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God. He is our righteousness. He is our deliverance. God promises himself. God delivers by giving himself. He delivers a sinful people by sending his son to live among a sinful people. God delivers a people through the blood of a lamb by sending his son as the Lamb and being our righteousness, not that we become not sinners, but that we become sinners saved by an alien righteousness. We become a people who trust in Christ, are now viewed most principally not by ourselves or even what other people view of us, but by how God views us. That justifying work of Christ becomes our foundation.

And while I gave a story about a lost key and a misplaced wallet, don't miss a simple story of what is a far deeper truth about my heart, and that in everyday annoyances, everyday interactions, our heart and what we say we believe and how we really live is being shown. He calls you to comfort today. He calls you to lay down what other people think of you. God calls you to lay down how you view yourself, and to rest in how he views you in Jesus Christ. The first question and answer of the Heidelberg Catechism is how I will finish this morning, and it is this truth:

Q: What is your only comfort in life?

A: That I am not my own,
but belong—

body and soul,
in life and in death—

to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.

He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood,
and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil.

He also watches over me in such a way
that not a hair can fall from my head
without the will of my Father in heaven;
in fact, all things must work together for my salvation.

Because I belong to him,
Christ, by his Holy Spirit,

assures me of eternal life
and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready
from now on to live for him.

He is our sure foundation. Let's pray.

Father, now, we ask, forgive us for the sin of denying your promises and of trying to work up our own salvation to prove to ourselves and to prove to others and to prove to you that we can do it. May we be able to rest in the sure foundation of the deliverance that is ours in Christ, and who you say we are. We give you thanks and praise. In Jesus' name. Amen.