



LEADER'S GUIDE

Week 6: Numbers 13 & 14 **Wilderness Lament**

October 23, 2016

Before you begin this study, ask the Holy Spirit to show you what God is saying in these scriptures.

Day 1: Numbers 13 – the promised land

God had promised to make the Israelites a great nation and He was leading them from their slavery in Egypt to a new promised land. As noted in Numbers 11 and 12, the Israelites journeyed from Kibroth Hattaavah to Hazeroth and then to the Desert of Paran.

1. **In Numbers 13: 1, what was the new land that God was giving to the Israelites?** It was the land of Canaan. **Where is this land, relative to where the Israelites were in the wilderness?** Canaan was quite far north of Mt. Sinai and the Desert of Paran, along the Mediterranean Sea near Jerusalem. **What did God tell Moses to do?** God told Moses to send men from each tribe to explore the land of Canaan. Their names and tribes are listed in verses 4 – 15.
2. **In verses 17-20, what instructions did Moses give to the men who were to explore Canaan?** They were instructed to see what the land was like, whether it was fertile, whether there were trees, and what kinds of fruits were grown. In addition, they were to see whether the people there were strong or weak, whether there were many or few of them, and how well the towns were fortified. They were also instructed to bring back some of the fruit of the land.
3. **In verses 21-33, what did the explorers find and what did they say about this land?** They reported that the land flowed with milk and honey, and they brought back some grapes, pomegranates, and figs. **What did they say about the people who lived in Canaan?** They reported that the people are powerful and the cities are well-fortified. **What did they disagree about?** They disagreed about whether the Israelites should go up to take the land. Caleb said that the Israelites could certainly take the land. Others said that the Israelites could not be successful because the inhabitants were too strong, and said that the Israelites would seem like grasshoppers compared with those who lived there. Note the effect on the Israelites of the words of the faithless spies. **Imagine that you were an Israelite listening to these conflicting reports. What would you have recommended? How would you have responded?** There clearly was a risk for the Israelites in moving into a land that was controlled by other people. Those who are risk-averse could well determine that the dangers were too great. On the other hand, God had promised repeatedly to be with the Israelites and had promised to make them a great nation in this new land. This was a choice between minimizing risk or trusting God's promises.
4. **Can you recall a time when you wondered whether to go forward in your life? Who influenced you at that time? What words did they speak to you? What effect did those words have on what you chose to do?**

Day 2: Numbers 14: 1-3

- How did the Israelites respond to the report of those who had explored the land of Canaan? What words are used to describe their responses?** Numbers 14: 1 says that the people *raised their voices* and *wept aloud*. Verse 2 says that they *grumbled* and wondered why God had brought them to this place only to let them be killed. **Note how many of the Israelites responded this way.** All the people of the community.
- What were the Israelites afraid of? What did they think would happen to them?** They were afraid that they would be killed or that their wives and children would be taken as plunder by the inhabitants of Canaan. **What did they wish for instead of the challenges they would have faced in entering Canaan?** They wished they had died in Egypt or in the desert, and they wished that they could go back to Egypt. To them, slavery in Egypt seemed better than plunder and death by the hands of the Canaanites. They seemed to have forgotten the promises of God, who said that He would make them a great nation in a new land. Sometimes we have a positive view of the past even though the past was not really as rosy as we remember. Sometimes the current challenges seem gigantic, even though they are no more significant than what we have gone through in the past.
- Do you think that the response of the Israelites was justified? Why or why not?** It's always good for people to investigate a new situation before moving ahead, and to note in particular what difficulties they might face. They may not have been equipped—physically or mentally—for battles with the Canaanites. On the other hand, the Israelites were focusing on the challenges they saw, not remembering the promises and power of God. Even if their response was not justified, it was a natural human response to the uncertainties they faced.
- The Israelites had a long history of complaints since they had left Egypt. Using the verses listed below, describe the complaints, the sins that were associated with the complaints, and the results of these complaints (see also NIV Study Bible).**

Verses in Numbers	Complaint	Sin	Result
11:1	Hardships	Complain rather than pray	Many were destroyed by a plague God sent
11:4	Lack of meat	Lusted after what they didn't have	God sent quail, but a plague killed many of them
14: 1-4	Being stuck in the desert; facing giants in Canaan	Rebelling against God and God's leaders	The complainers weren't allowed to enter the promised land
16:3	About their leaders, Moses and Aaron	Greed for power	Some were swallowed up by the earth and then fire burned others
16:41	That Moses and Aaron had caused deaths	Blaming others for their own troubles	God sent a plague and 14,700 were killed
20:2-3	Lack of water	Didn't believe that God would provide	Moses was banned from entering the promised land
21:5	That God and Moses brought them into the desert	Failed to see that their problems were caused by their disobedience	God sent venomous snakes that killed and injured many people

DeGroat writes (p. 135): “When the Israelites complained to God, their minds were made up. They were ready to return to Egypt, to choose someone other than God to lead them. Instead of engaging God honestly in the midst of their suffering, they chose to turn their backs and hightail it back to the land where they could resume their relatively comfortable enslavement. It's this refusal to engage honestly in relationship that angers God.”

Day 3: Numbers 14: 1-4

1. **In verse 1, the Israelites were described as “weeping,” but in verse 2 they were described as “grumbling.” What similarities and differences do you see between these two responses? Are the similarities and differences significant? Why?** Their weeping demonstrated that they were feeling sorry for themselves; their grumbling demonstrated that they were blaming God or Moses rather than bearing any responsibility themselves for their situation, despite all that God had promised them. Both weeping and grumbling reflect the nervousness and uncertainty they felt at this point in their journey.
2. **God had continually promised to protect the Israelites, lead them to a new land, and make them a great nation. Why now, in verse 3, are the Israelites wondering why God would allow them to be plundered and killed? Why might they have lost their trust in God?** People tend to focus on the here and now, particularly when confronting scary situations. The Israelites were demonstrating their self-pity rather than their faith in God. The future is always more uncertain than the past and the present. In addition, people sometimes begin to assume that the good things they receive come because of their own effort rather than from God’s hands.
3. **How do you think you would have responded in this situation? Would you have trusted God’s promises or would you have been afraid that God was leading you into harm? Can you think of times in your life when you were not sure that you could trust God? How was this resolved?** Although we might quickly say that we would have trusted God, it isn’t always easy to do that. Consider how long the Israelites had been wondering through the desert and how many challenges they had faced. Consider also that God had been angry with them in their times of disobedience, so there may have been some natural doubt about whether God would fulfill His promises to Israel. Trust is more easily lost than gained or re-gained. We need to pray constantly that God will increase our faith, so that we can more fully trust His promises.
- 4.

Day 4: Numbers 14: 4 – 25

1. **In verse 4, what did the Israelites want to do? What did they want to do to their leader Moses? They wanted to choose another leader and go back to Egypt. What might explain this drastic response? Would you have responded differently? How? Why? Empathy is seeing a situation through the eyes of another person. Can you empathize with the Israelites?** It’s helpful to remember that the Israelites had previously questioned Moses’ leadership, including in Numbers 12 when Aaron and Miriam (Moses’ brother and sister) had spoken against Moses. Remember also the times when Moses had disappeared for several days, and the Israelites wondered where he was and whether he was going to return (Exodus 19 and 32). Consider also that several of the men who had explored the land of Canaan had advised against moving forward. It is human nature to find someone else to blame for the difficulties we face, and people in leadership positions are vulnerable to this blame.
2. **Imagine that you are Moses, listening to the nearly constant complaining and grumbling of the Israelites. How would you have responded? What would you have said to the people?** It was Moses’ primary responsibility to be faithful to God, rather than fearful of the people of Israel. This was not a democracy but a theocracy where God rules. Part of that responsibility would be for Moses to persist in communicating God’s instructions and God’s promises to the Israelites; they obviously needed frequent reminders. Moses could also have reminded the people of the times when he (Moses) had intervened on their behalf with God who was angry about the Israelites’ sins, including times when God’s anger was reduced because of Moses’ intercession.

3. **In verses 5 – 10, what did Joshua and Caleb say to the Israelites?** After tearing their clothes, they told the Israelites that the land of Canaan was “exceedingly good.” They also said that God would be with the Israelites, that they should not be afraid of the Canaanites, and that they must not rebel against God. Essentially, the message was: “fear not and trust God.” **How did the people respond?** They wanted to stone Joshua and Caleb. Not only did the Israelites want to get rid of Moses and choose another leader, they also wanted to kill these men who were trusting God.
4. **In verses 13 – 19, what did Moses say to God? What arguments did he use? How compelling are Moses’ arguments? Why?** In verses 11-12 God had expressed anger and frustration toward the Israelites, wondering why they did not trust Him despite all that God had done for them. In response, Moses again tried to plead with God on behalf of the Israelites, a role that Moses regularly performed. Moses reminds God that if the Israelites could successfully take the promised land, God’s name would be made known to other nations, including Egypt. On the other hand, he claims that if the Israelites failed in their mission, the other nations will conclude that God was not able to fulfill His promises. Moses reminds God of His promises and His constant protection for the Israelites. Resting on God’s promises is always a good strategy as we face challenges. Moses also reminds God that He (God) is slow to anger and abounding in love and forgiveness, and he again asks God to forgive the Israelites.
5. **In verses 20 – 25, how did God respond? What characteristics of God are revealed in these responses?** God proclaims His forgiveness, but He also demonstrates His justice and righteousness in acknowledging that there would be a punishment for the disobedience of the Israelites. God said that none of the disobedient people would be allowed to enter the promised land, except for Caleb and his descendants. God fulfills His promises. God punishes sin. God grants forgiveness. God’s power is greater than any earthly, human power. **Would you have been more angry or more forgiving in this situation?**

Day 5: Psalm 13

Psalm 13 is one of David’s prayers of lament, expressing his concern about God’s apparent absence and his concern about his enemies. (Another Psalm to consider is Psalm 73; in this psalm David expresses deep lament but closes with a tribute to God, his refuge.)

1. As David describes the situation in Psalm 13, in what ways does it seem similar to the Israelites’ situation in Numbers 14? How does it seem different? David, like the Israelites, was afraid that God had forgotten him or left him. David, like the Israelites, was afraid of his enemies triumphing over him. When we don’t see continual evidence of God’s power and His presence, we fall back on our own might and we fear that we will not be successful on our own.
2. **Throughout the Israelites’ wilderness experience, they were chronic complainers, constantly forgetting God’s power and God’s promises. In Psalm 13, the psalmist doesn’t seem to be complaining, but he does seem to be lamenting. What are the differences between complaint and lament?** (consult a dictionary or read DeGroat, pp. 135-136) DeGroat says, “When the Israelites complained to God, their minds were made up. They were ready to return to Egypt.... But complaining, faithlessly turning one’s back to God leads to the kind of tragic discipline Israel would receive from God on their Exodus journey.... lament contains in itself the possibility of extraordinary hope, restored desire, and a changed heart. At its core ... lament is a search for God. It is not a search for answers or an invitation to fix an ailment.... The difference between complaint and lament depends on our entire orientation toward God—complaining, we give up on God; in our lament we trust God with our deepest suffering and fears.” In other words, complaining is often about casting blame on others for what is happening to us that we don’t like or feel that we don’t deserve. Lament is less concerned with casting blame and more focused on the pain we are enduring and whether and how the difficulties might be overcome. **What do you complain about?** Consider how often our complaints are about relatively minor things, and consider how often our complaints reveal how quick

we are to blame others for what we are experiencing. **What do you lament about?** Lament is deeper than complaint and is less focused on fixing blame. Lament ponders the sometimes hidden causes of our pain and suffering (as well as the suffering of others). Lament searches for answers in a more complex way. Lament may also sometimes focus less on ourselves and more on the sufferings of others.

- 3. Consider how David closes this psalm.** The final verses articulate David's trust in God's love and salvation and they recall how God has been good to him. David's heart rejoices and he sings to the Lord. **How is this different from the Israelites' response in Numbers 14? What might explain the difference?** The Israelites continue to articulate their lack of faith in God and His promises, and their dissatisfaction with the leaders that God had provided for them. The Israelites demonstrate fear in a time of uncertainty, whereas David demonstrates trust in God. **In your times of complaint or lament, how well do you remember and rely on God's promises and God's power?**

Digging deeper - lament:

There are extensive descriptions of lament in the scriptures. What were these individuals and groups lamenting about? How is their lament different from complaining?

Lament is an impassioned expression of sorrow or grief. It allows us to wrestle through our hardships while clinging to God. Scripture is full of laments. The book of Habakkuk begins with a lament that seems to fit well in our time: "How long, O Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, 'Violence!' but you do not save? Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrong? Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and conflict abounds. Therefore, the law is paralyzed, and justice never prevails. The wicked hem in the righteous, so that justice is perverted." Hab 1:2-4. This gem of a book was written by a contemporary of Jeremiah, the accepted author of Lamentations. In it, Habakkuk has an ongoing dialogue with God – he laments and God answers. In the end, he makes a heartfelt confession of faith. "Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior." Hab 3:17-18. This pattern of 'THOUGH (whatever is causing grief or pain), YET will I believe, will I accept God's will,' is what separates lament from complaining. Lament allows us to be with God in our pain even when He feels far away, but secure in the knowledge that He is with us. Complaint is self-centered, it is feeling sorry for ourselves, and does not come from a place of faith.

The book of Job is full of lament. At that time, God's people believed that all things, good and bad, came from God. The understanding that Satan is also at work was not recognized. Therefore, Job felt that all that he was suffering was coming straight from God's hand. In chapter 19, he is answering one of his contemporaries with a long litany of all that he is enduring because of God. At the end of the chapter he acknowledges "I know that my redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand on the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes – I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!" Job 19:25-27.

The prophets lament frequently. The book of Lamentations is one long lament. Jeremiah prophesied the exile and destruction of Israel. His heart is broken and he weeps for his people who continue to reject God. His great sorrow is not for himself, but for others. Jeremiah is grieving with God, from a place of faith, not selfishness. What causes you to weep? Is it for your own lot in life or that of others?

A contemporary lament is the well-known hymn "It Is Well with My Soul". Horatio Spafford had endured tragedy in his life. Much of his wealth was destroyed in the Chicago fire. A young son died of illness. His family was set to vacation in Europe where they would see their good friend Dwight Moody preach. He was delayed due to business, but his wife and 4 daughters set off ahead of him. The ship was wrecked and only his wife survived. On his journey to her, he wrote the lyrics to the hymn. When life is hard and sorrow starts to overwhelm you, are you able to say that whatever your lot that it is well with your soul?

Day 6:

(If you have the book Leaving Egypt, read chapters 10 and 11. If you do not have the book, consider how you might respond to these questions based on your own experiences and understanding.)

1. On pages 133-134, DeGroat writes, “Lament, the ancient art of crying out before God, provides us with a means of honest and raw expression in times when our grief is too much to bear. It does not offer a quick fix or a tidy theological answer. Rather, it invites us to bring ourselves fully to a God who can handle our pain, perhaps more than we’ve ever imagined.” **Think about how you have dealt with serious pain and suffering in your life. How have you lamented? How did this experience impact your relationship with God and with others? How did you walk that fine line between complaining and lamenting? How do we avoid blaming God for our woes? How do we sustain our trust in God during times of deep suffering? What do we look to for “fixes” for our suffering?**
2. On page 137, DeGroat writes: “The church is the place where our personal laments can join the choir of hurt that sings its off-tune chorus before God.” **What would it look like to engage in communal lament during times of grief and suffering? How and when should Central College Church engage in lament? How can the church address those in our midst who are lamenting? How can you address those lamenters?** It is more important to show people that we understand their suffering than it is to fix blame. Empathy is more appropriate than suggesting quick fixes. Christ-like love should overcome desires for retribution or vengeance.
3. **Why do we sometimes (or often) fail to lament?** On page 137, DeGroat writes, “One of the reasons we may fail to lament is that there are so few safe people around to receive it.” We might be afraid to lament to God because we fear that God will punish us for our misdeeds, or we wonder whether God can really understand our pain or relate to our weakness. We might be afraid to lament to others because we fear that they will blame us for our difficulties. **What are the safe places where you can lament? When and how are you the “safe place” for others to lament?**
4. In chapter 11, DeGroat writes about the grasshopper effect, referring to the fear of the Israelites that they would seem small in comparison with the strong people who lived in the land of Canaan. Because of our self-doubt and our fears, we sometimes settle for less instead of reaching for what God promises. **Have you experienced these times of self-doubt? When and how has your self-doubt led you to be unwilling to accept the inheritance that God has promised? (See Ephesians 1: 14; Colossians 3: 24; Hebrews 9: 15; I Peter 1: 4). In these times of self-doubt, how can you learn to depend on God to do what He has promised?** On page 147, DeGroat writes “What caused Israel to balk on the very edge of ultimate satisfaction and restoration? Maybe we can ask ourselves the same question. What make you return continually to the same old patterns and behaviors? What prompts you to settle for less in your closest relationships instead of fighting for more? What makes you return to an addiction that you know hurts you and the ones you love?” In spite of our fears and our self-doubts, it is important to remember what God has promised – that He will be with us, that He will save us, and that He will bring us to the promised land. As DeGroat concludes this chapter (p. 153), “What the rest of the biblical story tells us is that God never, ever gives up on us, though we continually give up on ourselves. God doesn’t seem to think we’re grasshoppers at all.” May God give us the faith to rest securely in His promises and on His strength.