

SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS
Commentary by Michael Sigler
August 9, 2009

People Rebel

Numbers 14:1-12

Key verse: “Why is the Lord bringing us into this land to fall by the sword?...Would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?” (Numbers 14:3)

Most football fans have heard about Knute Rockne, legendary coach of the Notre Dame Fighting Irish. Some fans will have heard about the time Coach Rockne tricked his arch rival into giving up—mentally and emotionally—before the football game even began. Here’s how it happened.

Notre Dame was to play USC, and USC had the better team that year. So, Coach Rockne devised a plan to give his players a mental edge. Rockne found 100 local men who stood at least six-foot-four and weighed over 300 pounds. None of these men played football for Notre Dame, but Rockne had them all dress out in Fighting Irish uniforms and helmets. Then, at game time, these huge men led the real Notre Dame team onto the field.

When the USC players saw this horde of giants charging onto the field, they were filled with fear. Mentally and emotionally, the USC players resigned themselves to taking a beating that day. And they did! Rockne succeeded in getting his opponent to give up in fear, even before the game started.

Something similar happened to the Israelites when the spies brought back their report from Canaan. First came the “majority report,” which said in effect: *“It’s a wonderful land, alright. But it is filled with vicious giants and we are ‘like grasshoppers to them.’”* Joshua and Caleb gave the “minority report”—*“We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it”* (Numbers 13:30).

As Numbers 14 suggests, by the time the word circulated through the Israelite camp, those Canaan-land giants had grown even taller! The people nominated their Back-to-Egypt Committee to confront Moses and Aaron with this complaint: “Why is the Lord bringing us into this land by the sword?...Would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?” (v.3)

Joshua and Caleb tried again to persuade the people that God would give them the victory. “The land we went through as spies is an exceedingly good land. If the Lord is pleased with us, he will bring us into this land and give it to us, a land that flows with milk and honey. Only, do not rebel against the Lord; and do not fear the

people of the land” (vv.7-9). Tragically, verse 10 describes the peoples’ response: “the whole congregation threatened to stone them.”

It’s not a pretty picture, is it? And the long-term consequences were even worse. Because of their fear, unbelief, and disobedience, a generation wandered in the wilderness for the next 40 years instead of entering the Promised Land.

There are important lessons here for every believer as we make our journey of faith. In fact, this story confronts us with some challenging questions:

1. Will we be ruled by fear or by faith? God promises to give us victory over the “giants” in our lives. But we must decide either to retreat in fear or advance in faith.

Two great Bible verses can guide us:

“For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind” (2 Timothy 1:7, KJV).

“And this is the victory that overcomes the world, even our faith” (1 John 5:4).

2. Are we moving forward in the walk of faith or heading “back to Egypt”? It really is true that, in our walk with Christ, we are either growing and moving forward in faith or else we are going in the other direction. In the Christian life, it’s impossible to stay “in neutral.” Or, as John Ed Mathison, former pastor of the Frazer United Methodist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, has said: “You’re either ripe and growing or over-ripe and ready to rot!” This is true of churches as well as individual Christians.

3. Will we obey God or disobey God? When my daughter, Elisabeth, was about 4 years old, she brought home from Sunday School a worksheet that she had colored with Crayolas. In large letters, that worksheet said: “If I learn to obey my parents, I will learn to obey God.”

Most of us are well past 4-year-old Sunday School, but obedience to God is still a choice we must regularly make. The issues may be complex at times, but the fundamental choice remains: Is Jesus Christ the *Lord* of my life? Does He have His rightful place on the throne of my life? With God’s help, will I choose to obey the Lord today?

End notes: A couple of items in today’s lesson may need clarification. (1) In Numbers 14:6, when confronted by the “Back to Egypt Committee,” Joshua and Caleb “tore their clothes.” This was a ritual gesture that was always a display of strong feeling. Depending on the context, tearing one’s clothing in this way might be a gesture of grief, anger, sorrow for sin, or repentance.

(2) In Numbers 14:10, we read that, when the people threatened to stone Joshua and Caleb, “the glory of the Lord appeared at the tent of meeting to all the Israelites.” Here the “glory of the Lord” is God’s manifest presence. Remember that, during this time, God’s presence appeared to the Israelites in the form of cloud and pillar of fire. In this verse, God’s presence most likely came as a means of

support and protection for Joshua and Caleb as well as Moses and Aaron. With this event having just occurred, it seems even more tragic that the people still responded in unbelief and rebellion.

(Contact Michael at msigler@fumcfwb.com)