

Don't harden your hearts

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- [0 : 00] Now, when I was studying at Bible College in Sydney, one of the ways that my wife, Chin Yin, and I like to relax was by watching this Korean drama series called Phantom. It's a police show about cybercrime and high-level conspiracy. I highly recommend it. Now, in one of the early episodes, there's a stalker going after various people. So what happens is that the victim is usually on her computer when the computer suddenly gets hijacked. You know, suddenly the cursor can't move and she can't control anything. And then music from the Phantom of the Opera starts playing from the speakers. And then a message will pop up on her internet browser saying, remember the sins of your own hand. And then she'll end up murdered. It was pretty creepy stuff. Now, one evening, Chin Yin was out and I was alone in my room studying. Chin Yin's laptop happens to be open on her desk behind me.
- [1 : 12] Nice ambient classical music is playing in the background. When out of nowhere, do-do-do-do, do-do-do-do-do-do-do-do-do. Phantom music starts playing. Well, it was loud and sudden, so you can bet that I jumped out of my skin. I immediately look around, my heart beating faster. It's a message about to pop up on my browser. Is someone coming for me? Should I reach for my badminton racket just in case? Now, thankfully, it happened to be nothing more sinister than YouTube just switching over to new music. But for just a few seconds, I felt a genuine moment of fear. Now, we can laugh at that, but fear can be one of the most powerful forces in our life. Can't it? All of us have experienced it before, that moment when your palms just sweat a little bit faster, your breathing becomes just a bit quicker, your body tenses up just a little bit more.
- [2 : 14] It's that moment when you're calling your child and no one is answering the phone and you start imagining all kinds of scenarios of potential accidents. It's that moment when you look at your SPM results and know straight away that you're not going to be able to get into the courses that you wanted and your next step is now unclear. It's that moment when your boss calls you in for a one-to-one meeting but refuses to tell you beforehand what it's all about. It can pop up anywhere. The Christian counsellor, Ed Welch, observes that even young people don't even have to learn, fear, young children rather, they instinctively know that they live in an unsafe world. And our state of fear often influences and motivates our responses. Again, you can see it all around us. Why do some people religiously follow the advice of long WhatsApp messages telling you what you should eat or avoid? Because they're fearful of getting dementia or cancer. Why do some people get tricked by investment scams of the sort that you read in the star? Because they're fearful of financial insecurity or getting left behind. Why do some people rush to see the bombo and go to church sometimes in the same week?

[3 : 39] Because they're fearful of strange omens or evil spirits. We live in a world of fear and those fears often drive our responses.

Well, this morning we're going to think a little bit more about this subject matter. Israel is going to experience its own brush with fear.

And we're going to see how they respond and how that impacts their relationship with God. And sadly, it's not going to be a pretty story. I said last week that we're entering the portion of Israel's journey where they experience tragedy after tragedy as they mount rebellion after rebellion against God.

And these were written as examples and warnings for us so that we don't go the same way. And so today we'll answer that question.

How should we respond to God in moments of fear? And the example of Israel in numbers 13 to 14 will prove instructive for us.

[4 : 47] So let's get our bearings as we rejoin the story. As you would know if you've been with us since the beginning of this series, Israel started very well. Redeemed from slavery, they've watched as God performs sign after sign and wonder after wonder against their enemy, Pharaoh.

They then traveled to Mount Sinai where they met with the one who liberated them, the one who carried them on eagle's wings, and the one who treats them as valued personal relations.

And he gets them ready for the ultimate journey as they set out for their true home. And last week, yes, we had a hiccup where the people complained.

But hey, everyone can make a mistake once in a while, right? After all, by the last verse of chapter 12, they're right at the edge of the promised land.

They're right at the edge of glory. You can feel the excitement bubbling up like a Kuching knight whose plane is hovering over Tabuan Laru as they get ready to land at Kuching International Airport, who's ready to taste the joys of good laksa and enjoy the peaceful nature of our city, having endured the wilderness of KL.

[6 : 11] That's kind of the mood here. And what is so amazing about this is that it's all pure gift. Look at 13 verse 1.

The Lord said to Moses, Send some men to explore the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the Israelites. God's giving this land to them.

It's a gift given generously without consideration of Israel's prior worth. After all, if God took that into consideration, he should have withdrawn his gift in a heartbeat.

Remember what the people wanted last week? Egypt. And remember how they threw a huge tantrum? And yet God doesn't withdraw his gift.

A reminder to us, isn't it, that it is by grace you have been saved, through faith. And this is not from yourselves. It is the gift of God, not by works, so that no one can boast.

[7 : 17] What we possess is undeserved kindness. And when we pick up the story in Numbers 13, we discover a world of fruitfulness.

A world of fruitfulness. God says to the Israelites, Go see for yourselves. Check out my gift. Send some men to explore this land I'm giving you.

Or as Moses says in verses 18 to 20, see what this land is like. Is it good or bad? How is the soil? Is it fertile or poor?

Are there trees in it? Or is it like the wilderness we've been traveling in? And so leaders, one from each tribe, are sent out on a scouting mission.

In verses 21 and 22, we discover they travel from the very south to the very north of the land, taking in all the sights, getting a feel for the place, checking out the people.

- [8 : 20] In verse 23, they even bring back a taste of Canaan. They cut off a branch bearing a single cluster of grapes.
- And those grapes are massive. Verse 23 again, we see that they needed two men to carry it on a pole between them, along with a selection of pomegranates and figs.
- These are not the grapes you're buying at Everrise. And that's a massive clue as to how amazing this gift is.
- The land is incredibly fruitful. And so when these scouts come back, it's no surprise that they filed a positive report. Verse 27, 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 his fruit. They don't mean, of course, that the land only has milk and honey.
- [9 : 26] It's a figure of speech, a way of describing the land as lush and rich and fertile, able to produce an abundance of staple food and luxuries in equal measure.
- Deuteronomy 8, verse 7 to 9 on the screen helps fill in the details. It's a land with brooks, streams, and deep springs gushing out into the valleys and hills.
- A land with wheat and barley, vines and fig trees, pomegranates, olive oil, and honey. A land where bread will not be scarce, and you will like nothing.
- A land where the rocks are iron, and you can dig copper out of the hills. It's a world of fruitfulness. This is their future.
- And this is our future. A world of fruitfulness. This is where we're going. One of the ways God describes the future of all those who trust in Christ is by painting a vivid picture of us coming to a feast.
- [10 : 38] For example, at the end of time, the prophet Isaiah says, God will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples.
- The best of meats and the finest of wines. It's fruitful. It's a place where our hearts will be full, filled with the richness of laughter and the abundance of joy.
- One writer from the days of old even compares the joys of heaven to wine. Because receiving heaven's joys, he says, will not be like chewing on tough meat where it's hard work.
- But instead, receiving heaven's joys will be more like wine because it will slide into our souls smoothly, refilling us again and again with great delight.
- This is our future. This is where God is leading us to. And this is where we set our hearts on.
- [11 : 41] A world of fruitfulness. Rejoice, Jesus says, that your names are written in heaven. If we trust him, this becomes our inheritance.
- We have a promised land of great fruitfulness to look forward to. But not everyone saw it that way. Back in verse 18, Moses asked the scouts not just to check out the land, but also the people living there.
- Are they strong or weak? Do they live in fortified or unprotected cities? And now, the scouts begin to move for the first time from glorious wonder to gloomy prognosis.
- Look at verse 28. But the people who live there are powerful and the cities are fortified and very large.
- We even saw descendants of Anak there. In case you're wondering what's so fearsome about the children of Anak, they are known for being very, very tall and therefore very, very scary.
- [13 : 00] As a result, a disagreement now breaks out. What should the recommended next step be? One of the scouts, Caleb, stands up first in verse 30 and gives us option number one.

He says, let's go. Let's take the land for we can certainly do it. He's confident that despite the size of the people, despite the well-fortified cities, the Lord is more than equal to the task and will give them the land he promised.

But the other scouts also stand up, verse 31, and they present option number two, verse 31. But the man 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. Now notice the language they use to try to win people over to their side.

Look at verse 32 again. They said, the land we explored devours those living in it and all the people we saw there are of great size.

[14 : 22] So now, the land is no longer one that flows with milk and honey. Instead, it's described as if it's a black hole, infertile, unstable, consuming everything in its path.

They now report the land as if it's destructive as are its inhabitants. Look at verse 33. We saw the Nephilim there, the descendants of Anak come from the Nephilim, and we seem like grasshoppers in our own eyes and we look the same to them.

It's a report that paints a world of fear. So, how is it that these two groups can have such different interpretations?

They've seen the same things. The answer is simple. One fact that God in, the other didn't. In chapter 13, verse 27, the scouts describe the land as the land which you, Moses, sent us, rather than as the land God has given them, which is the typical way the Pentateuch describes the Promised Land.

Their perspective has become man-centered, as is obvious from the rest of the report. God is missing from the equation and so fear begins to grip their imaginations and drive their responses.

[16 : 00] Caleb, however, and according to chapter 14, Joshua as well, sees things differently. They too saw the giants. They might even agree they are grasshoppers by comparison.

But the difference is, they trusted that the Lord is still with them. The Lord who parted the Red Sea in front of his people would not abandon them now.

And they trusted the Lord is good. He wants to give them those grapes. And so they exhorted the people to go his way. So what the people have before them are two options, two different perspectives, two competing worldviews.

On the one hand, they could follow Caleb's lead. They could see the land as flowing with milk and honey, which, yes, has some strong-looking opponents living there.

But God would secure their victory. He will keep his word. Or, they could follow the scout's lead and say, no, God was lying.

[17 : 09] The land isn't that great. It devours people. And you know what? The people are so big, we don't have a chance. So what are they going to do next?

Will they choose to see their future as one where a world of fruitfulness awaits, given to them by God? Or will they only dwell within their current world of fear, where God is absent to them?

Chapter 14 tells us which path they take. Verse 1. That night, all the members 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 wilderness, 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? Faith gives way to fear.

- [18 : 21] They've come so far, all the way to the edge of the promised land. But instead of seeing God about to give them a world of fruitfulness, they chose to let fear have the final say.
- if we enter the land, they say, these giants are going to take our wives and children as bounty and make mincemeat of us. And indeed, they accuse God of being some kind of divine prankster, playing a cruel joke on them.
- You save us so that you could kill us, they say. And so they are ready to reject Moses and to reverse the entire course of the exodus.
- They were ready to cast away all the benefits of their salvation and return to Egypt. And so it's no surprise that Moses and Aaron react with dismay in verse 5.
- They fall face down, knowing that they've just heard blasphemy. And Joshua and Caleb too tear their clothes in grief, verse 6. They know the gravity of the situation.
- [19 : 35] So how do they respond? Well, in verse 7, they begin speaking to the gathering again. They're making one final attempt to get Israel back on track.
- And the way they do that, notice, is by proclaiming once again the good news of God's promises. Verse 7. They 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 devour them.
- Their protection is gone, but the Lord is with us. Do not be afraid of them. They reminded the people of gospel truth, that the Lord has secured for us the best possible future, that it is a gift from him, that he will be with us, and that the way forward is to walk with him daily in repentance and faith.
- Well, this is all still true today, isn't it? You see, like the Israelites, we too still live in a world where objects of fear exist.
- [21 : 04] Joshua and Caleb didn't dispute the existence of those giants, or say they were nothing. And we don't dispute that in our fallen world, there exist all kinds of things that make us fearful.
- Perhaps it's the genuine work or study or financial pressures which are stressing you out right now. Perhaps it's the fear of how you will die, be it from cancer or Alzheimer's disease, or simply being alone.
- Perhaps it's the fear of evil spirits causing you much damage and harm. And Numbers 13 shows us that it's okay to acknowledge those fears.
- Christians don't live in a la-la land where they deny any of those things exist. We do not yet inhabit the promised land. But the issue that Numbers 13 to 14 is addressing isn't so much whether objects of fear exist, nor is it saying that we cannot be anxious or fearful.
- Let me make that clear. The Bible assumes we will sometimes be fearful. Otherwise, Jesus wouldn't say so often, do not be afraid. And Paul wouldn't need to say in Philippians chapter 4, turn your anxieties into prayers.
- [22 : 33] The bare emotion of fear is not what causes Moses and Aaron and Caleb and Joshua to grieve. But what Numbers 13 to 14 is more interested in is our response when we are fearful.
- How do we view life then? And who do we turn to in moments of fear? For the majority of the scouts and the people, their fear caused them to turn away from the Lord.
- They saw him as either not being good enough or not being powerful enough. And so fear became the boss that controlled them, not the Lord.

And so they responded by blaspheming the Lord and wanting to undo their redemption. And that's how we can be tempted to respond to it, can't we? I know it's certainly true of me.

When I'm fearful of something, I begin to grumble and to complain and act in ways inconsistent with being one of the redeemed. When we are controlled by fear, thinking of the Lord as not big enough, we start turning from him.

[23 : 51] So for instance, if our view of God is small, fear of the supernatural world could tempt us instead to turn to charms and visit the mediums, or even just misuse the Bible as a sort of magical talisman, the way pagans do, just mindlessly quoting verses.

While we turn away from relying on the Lord in prayer and properly studying and living by his word. If our view of God is small, fear of chronic disease might tempt us to put our ultimate trust in the latest diet, fats, or vitamins, or exercise regime that promises to guarantee our health, rather than in the Lord who holds your physical self in his hands, and who does guarantee a brand new body in that calming world of fruitfulness.

If our view of God is small, we'll fear that your children wouldn't succeed in life, according to how the world judges success, might tempt us to explode in excessive anger against them when they don't make the hopeful grades, or excel at the ECAs, because we doubt that God has the best in mind for them.

We think God is not good. And so when we live only by fear, forgetting who God is in the process, well, we often respond in sinful ways which grieve him.

And so when fear strikes, what God desires is for us to turn to him in faith like Caleb and Joshua. For when we live only by fear, we are kept from enjoying God's promises.

[25 : 45] We cannot enjoy his presence with us no matter what happens, as he has promised. We cannot enjoy his reassurance that he will lead us home to a feast of abundance, as he has promised.

Instead, we try to become prophets, trying to predict and control our own futures, but without his blessing. And when we live only by fear, we are kept from going all out for Jesus, because we are scared that God wouldn't see us true if we are sacrificial with our time, or our money, or our relational energy.

And so we play it safe, imagining the way of Egypt is more secure, more, but we miss out on seeing God in action. And the antidote to that, as Joshua and Caleb show us, is to keep being reminded of the promises of the gospel.

Why is it such good news to both of them that God is with them? It's because they remember how God has rescued them in the exodus from the clutches of their enemies and provided a Passover lamb.

And that's how they know God is good and God is powerful. And we remember too. In fact, we remember more, for we see God rescuing us from the clutches of sin and the devil.

[27 : 18] At the cross, Christ has released us from the depth of sin and triumphed over Satan. The cross is how we know God is good and God is powerful.

And just as the scouts saw the first fruits, remember they enjoyed a taste of Canaan in that single cluster of grapes? So we too already enjoy the first fruits of our redemption.

Resurrection, life and power is ours already now. The privilege of being friends with God is already ours now. more. And that keeps us looking forward to the time when we will enjoy our inheritance in full.

But how do the people respond to the encouragements of Joshua and Caleb? Welcome back with me to 14 verse 10. But the whole assembly talk about stoning them.

They harden their hearts to the gospel preaching. Their fear turns them into a rebellious mob. Thus, in verses 11 to 12, God basically says, If so, then you have to bear the consequences.

[28 : 34] You won't enter the promised land. I'll just start all over again. For the people, despite seeing all those miracles back in Exodus, despite seeing the good land and the good grapes, despite seeing judgment for all last week, well, they still harden themselves against the Lord.

And so the Lord is perfectly within his rights to judge them. And when we harden our hearts against the gospel, well, the Lord is perfectly within his rights to judge us.

But Moses appeals to God in verses 13 to 19, pleading with him on behalf of the people. Notice his arguments. He doesn't say, oh, they're innocent.

He doesn't say, oh, God, it was just a minor infringement. Instead, he appeals to God on the basis of his reputation. Look at verse 15. Sorry, I'm just looking for it.

Here we are. If you put all these people to death, leaving none alive, the nations who have heard this report about you will say, the Lord was not able to bring these people into the land he promised them on oath, so he slaughtered them in the wilderness.

[29 : 54] And he also appeals to God on the basis of his character, verse 17. Now may the Lord's strength be displayed, just as you have declared, the Lord is slow to anger, abounding in love, and forgiving sin and rebellion.

Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished. He punishes the children for the sin of the parents of the third and fourth generation. The two are linked. Moses is saying, Lord, I know you are gracious, so please save your people.

Forgive them. And Lord, when you do this, only then will the nations know who you really are, the God who saves and keeps his promises.

Now in verse 18, Moses is actually just quoting God back to him. Back in Exodus 34, God has revealed to Moses that he is the God who is slow to anger and who forgives.

But Moses doesn't just engage in selective quoting. He quotes Exodus 34 verse 6 to 7 in full. He admits as well that God does not leave the guilty unpunished.

[31 : 10] You see, if it was me, I probably wouldn't quote that part because that doesn't help my case. But Moses sticks to the truth. He says to God, God, I know you are gracious and I know you are just.

You are not just one or the other. And I trust you will be gracious and you will be just in the way you deal with your people, even as I plead with you.

Do what you must. And that's what God does. In verse 20, he pardons Israel. But then in verses 21 and 22, he also says, not a single one of the Exodus generation will step foot into the promised land.

Instead, from the edge of the promised land, they are now doomed to wander in the wilderness for 40 years. Israel will inherit the land as God has promised, but it will be a new generation who will actually enter.

Those who were counted all the way back in chapter 1 have forfeited their inheritance with the exception of Joshua and Caleb. And that's all in verses 26 to 35.

[32 : 30] And for the scouts that gave the bad report, their end is immediate. They not only harden their own hearts, but led others to harden their hearts, and so they reap the consequences.

The Lord strikes them down in verses 36 to 38. God's grace is not to be taken for granted. But the hearts of men are hard indeed.

In verses 39 to 41, Israel still presumes they know best. They say, right, let's go and take the land now. Isn't that what God wants?

Never mind that God has updated his instructions and told them, no, you can't go into the land anymore. They now have to wander in the desert. It's fake repentance.

They might have shed tears, but they still did not listen to the Lord. And hence that's why Moses says in verse 41, why are you disobeying the Lord's command?

[33 : 32] This will not succeed. Do not go up because the Lord is not with you. You will be defeated by your enemies. Tears alone, without an accompanying turn to the Lord, it's of no use.

So what do we learn from all this? Well, let me begin first of all with what we shouldn't learn. One of my preaching mentors, David Cook, says that sometimes it's helpful to see what not to learn so that we don't misapply the passage.

you see, prosperity gospel preachers would often take numbers 13 to 14 and tell you, see, God wants to give you the best grapes.

He wants to give you the best health and wealth now. But you need to claim it. You need to get rid of all your negative thinking and have enough faith.

In other words, these prosperity gospel preachers say, you need to have positive thinking so that God will give you perfect wealth and perfect health now.

[34 : 48] That's the prosperity gospel interpretation. But what the prosperity gospel gets wrong is that our problem is not just a lack of positive thinking or a lack of willpower.

Numbers 14 and in fact, most of the book of Numbers, says that our problem is a failure to trust God to be good to us even when things look bad and therefore to say that he's a liar.

It's essentially the failure of Genesis chapter 3. And the promised land is not representative of material blessing in the here and now, but the abundance we will enjoy in the new creation.

In the new creation, we will enjoy perfect health and perfect wealth, but not before. So what do we learn from all this?

Well, we see how fear presents us with an opportunity. fear can be an opportunity. It's an opportunity for us to humble ourselves and run to God.

[36 : 09] It's an opportunity to find refuge in the Lord who says to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, Israel's ancestors, do not be afraid.

It's an opportunity to go to Jesus who on the night he went to the cross, told his disciples. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.

It's an opportunity to say, God, I trust your gospel promises. I trust you when you say you will be with us. You have forgiven us.

You will lead the way home, whatever the circumstances now, because you sent your only son, Jesus. But, it can also be an opportunity for us to harden our hearts.

When we no longer marvel at our Lord, we begin to seek refuge in other things. As the pastor, Richard Zipps, said centuries ago, when a Christian has lost his way and is empty of Christ, a thousand and one other things will come and fill that man up.

[37 : 23] And when the love and grace and presence of Christ no longer softens and sparks something in our hearts, well, we are in a dangerous place. We might be hardening our hearts and giving up our inheritance.

So, how can we keep God's gospel promises burning in our hearts so that we will turn to him? Well, as we finish, let me suggest to you one surprising way.

It's to keep in mind that one day you will die. Now, that's not something our culture, or indeed most cultures are comfortable with. And you might think this suggestion is quite morbid, especially coming from someone in his 30s.

But when the reality of death is far from our minds, God's gospel promises seem disconnected from our lives. the fears and cares of today seem much bigger.

But when we bring to mind death's inevitability, we feel death's sting more strongly. And that's when God's gospel promises shine much brighter.

[38 : 39] For when we understand that death is real, and death is coming for you, and death is a problem, but that Jesus has beaten it, and that even death cannot separate us from God, well, we understand how much bigger he is, and the fears of today will become lesser by comparison.

And the more we recall the reality of death, the more we will carefully number our days, asking God to keep our hearts soft towards him.

Or as Hebrews 4 puts it, we will make every effort to enter the rest of the promised land. So let us not be overwhelmed by our fears and respond unfaithfully.

When they come, let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, and run the race faithfully, knowing that a world of fruitfulness awaits us.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we come to you acknowledging that we live in a scary world.

[39 : 59] We live in a world where there are many things that put fear into our hearts. And so Father, we just pray that today help us to fear you more. help us to see you as who you really are, the God who is so big that you sent Jesus, your only son, to die on the cross for us and to defeat Satan that way.

And so Father, help us to journey along with you. Help us when we feel fearful to respond by turning to you in faith and trust that you will be with us and you know what's best for us no matter what.

In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen. Thank you.