

“An Army of Grasshoppers”
Numbers 13:26-14:9
Series: The Story Chapter 6. Wandering
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Has this ever happened to you? The car is loaded up. The kids are strapped in their seats. The house is locked. You pull out of the driveway, and before you get to the end of the block, a voice from the back asks, “Are we there yet?” For the rest of the trip you will hear that question about seven hundred times. In fact, Isaac Newton has a forgotten fourth law of motion. It isn’t about velocity or gravity. It only applies to car trips. His formula states that the number of children multiplied by the length of the trip and the gallons of soda consumed, divided by the distance between the kids in the backseat will give you the WPM: Whines per mile. “He touched me,” “Get off my side,” “I’m hungry,” “I feel sick,” “I have to use the bathroom,” “Are we there yet?”

As Moses led the children of Israel through the wilderness, I’m sure he heard more complaining than when the Brady Bunch went to the Grand Canyon. After eleven months of camping by Mount Sinai, after the nasty cow incident, God tells Moses to start marching the people toward the Promised Land. And that’s when the grumbling begins. First they whine about travelling in the desert. Then they moan about the manna. God gives them this supernatural bread from heaven. They crush it, grind it, dice it, slice it and make thousands of julienne fries with it. They eat so much manna, they get sick of it. Can you imagine the conversation every night in those tents? “What’s for dinner?” “Manna.” “Manna again? What did you do with it this time: fried manna, manna burgers, manna-banana bread? “No, tonight we’re having Italian...manna-cotti.” “Give us meat,” they cry. So God says, “Now the Lord will give you meat, and you will eat it—until it comes out of your nostrils and you loathe it” (Numbers 11:18, 20). The situation is so tense that even Moses’ sister and brother, Miriam and Aaron, start to grumble and complain. And every time Moses brings their complaints to God it sounds like the Lord is about to say, “Don’t make me come down there.”

Now is a good time to address an issue you may be wrestling with in your reading and discussion of the Story. Why does God seem so grouchy and angry in the Old Testament and so loving and gracious in the New Testament? The truth is: God is loving in both. Norman Geisler, President of Southern Evangelical Seminary says,

I studied the word “love” and found it occurs 322 times in the Bible, about half in each testament. So you have the same emphasis on love in both.¹

The Old and New Testaments are really two halves of the same story. The Story of the Bible will never make sense to you unless you have both the Old and New Testaments. Another word for “Testament” is “Covenant.” There are two main covenants in the Bible.

¹ Lee Strobel, *The Case for Faith*, Zondervan, c. 2000, p. 165.

The Old Covenant with Moses Warns of a Curse. Though God wants to save us and live with us, He cannot ignore our sin. It would be unjust for any Judge to ignore one who breaks the law. The word “holy” appears 584 times in the Bible. God is holy because He is pure and untainted by even the slightest stain of sin. His very presence wipes out sin just as light chases away darkness, fire consumes wood, bleach blots out stains. The main reason God seems so harsh in the Old Testament is His holiness cannot live with our sin. That’s why people in the Bible fear when God comes near. They know they are stained with sin and His powerful holiness will wipe them. Picture the end of Raiders of the Lost Ark and you get the idea. You don’t play around with a holy God.

God chooses the Israelites to be His holy people. He gives them the Law, the Covenant with Moses, to help them be holy. “You are to be holy to me because I, the LORD, am holy, and I have set you apart from the nations to be my own” (Leviticus 20:26). In essence God says, ‘If you keep My Law, you will become holy and I, the Holy God, will live with you and bless you.’ But the people of Israel, like all people, do not keep the Law. And whenever you break a law, there is a punishment. Is there a way out?

Yes. In the **New Covenant God Himself Saves Us from the Curse.** Paul says,

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: “Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree” (Deuteronomy 21:23; Galatians 3:13).

The God of the Old Testament shows up in person in Jesus. We think God is full of anger, wrath and curses. Yet when He appears in the flesh, He does an amazing thing: He takes all that anger, wrath and curse upon Himself. The curse of God falls on Jesus. But it is the curse that we deserve. He bears our curse. And in so doing, He satisfies all the demands of the Law. He fulfills the Law for us. Because Jesus took the curse for us, we can live with our holy God without fear, we can receive the promise of eternal life if we put our faith in Him.

So in reply to the question: why does God seem so angry in the Old Testament? My simple answer is that our picture of God is not complete until we get to the New Testament. At this point in the Story God’s true character is still a little fuzzy and out of focus. When we look back at God through the lens of Jesus, He brings the image of God into perfect focus. We discover that the God who seemed like a harsh Judge to the Israelites turns out to be the Savior who takes the curse for us.

At this point in the Story, however, the Israelites still see God as angry, distant and uncaring. They are whining. And they whine the most when they reach the border of the Promised Land. Like a good general, Moses sends twelve spies to scope out the terrain and bring back intelligence before the invasion. After forty days, after a five hundred mile mission, they return with glowing reports. “We went into the land to which you sent us, and it does flow with milk and honey! Here is its fruit” (Numbers 13:27). Two men shoulder a pole from which hangs an enormous cluster of sweet succulent grapes. Joy explodes in the camp. ‘We are almost home.’ But the celebration is quickly snuffed out when the spies add, ‘There are giants in that land.’ “The people who live

there are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large. We can't attack those people; they are stronger than we are. The land we explored devours those living in it. All the people we saw there are of great size. We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them" (Numbers 13:28, 31-33). 'An army of grasshoppers doesn't stand a chance against a nation of giants. They'll squash us under their boots until all that's left is a green stain.'

A simmering murmur now rises to a full-boil rebellion in a matter of seconds. "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" (Numbers 14:2-4). In the face of this all out revolt, Moses and Aaron fall on their faces in prayer before the nation.

Suddenly, into the eye of that swirling cauldron, jump two of the spies to help their leader. With a booming voice, Caleb quiets the crowd. "We should go up and take possession of the land," he shouts, "for we can certainly do it." Joshua, standing beside him, adds, "Do not rebel against the Lord." "And do not be afraid of the people of the land," Caleb declares, "because we will swallow them up. Their protection is gone, but the Lord is with us. Do not be afraid of them" (Numbers 14: 9).

Brave speeches from brave men. In another age, under different circumstances, with a better army, they may have led the people to a stunning victory. But not this time. To the Israelites, Moses, Aaron, Joshua and Caleb are simply the obstacles standing between them and the safety of Egypt. They begin to reach down for stones to fire at the four when a blinding fire turns the night into day. The Lord has come. All their complaining and whining in the backseat made God come down there to break it up. Because of their revolt, that whole generation of Israelites is condemned to wander the desert for forty years. They will never see their beloved Promised Land because they did not trust God to take them there.

Perhaps we shouldn't be so hard on the Israelites. After all, they are escaped slaves with little training in warfare and scant provisions. The gigantic foes before them can hurl spears and arrows at them from the safety of their thick walled fortresses. The enemy has the home field advantage and they are not about to budge. They are just being realistic. The Israelites do the math and every equation tells them to turn and run.

You've done the math before. Maybe even now you are on the border of an overwhelming situation. It makes you feel as tiny as a cricket in Times Square. Your resources, your abilities, your strength seem puny against the towering giants before you. What if you make the wrong decision?

A spy is captured and sentenced to death by an enemy general who has an unusual custom. When it is time for the execution, the guards bring the spy before the general. "What will it be," asks the general, "the firing squad or 'the big, black door?'" The spy hesitates for a long time. Finally he chooses the firing squad. A few minutes after the shots ring out, an aide asks the general, "What lies beyond the big door?" "Freedom,"

replies the general. "I've known only a few brave enough to take that door. They always fear what they don't know."²

The Israelites fear the unknown that awaits them in the Promised Land. Fear magnifies the size of their enemies and shrinks their own abilities. Fear makes them long for the slavery of Egypt over the freedom of their new homeland. Fear causes them to grumble and murmur and even attempt to murder God's chosen leader.

But two spies are not afraid. Why? Caleb and Joshua are no fools. They know the weaknesses and the deficits on their side. They can do the math. But they add one factor into the equation the rest forget. "The Lord is with us. He will lead us," says Caleb, "Those Canaanites don't stand a chance." "But we're just an army of grasshoppers compared to them," complain the others. "Yes," says Joshua, "an army of grasshoppers that will swarm all over that land. A plague of locust that will swallow them up."

Now you might say that the problems of this world are as massive and fearful as a legion of giants. There's nothing we can do about poverty, illiteracy, AIDS, homelessness, injustice, drugs, and unbelief. And you are right if you are just counting on us. But don't count out my God. We may only be an army of grasshoppers, but with God's power, the Church of Jesus Christ can swarm all over this world.

We can be like little Ruby Bridges who, at ten minutes to eight, walked with her head up, eyes forward, through a screaming mob with two U.S. marshals ahead of her and two behind to become the first African-American child to break the color barrier in the New Orleans public school district. She was the only student in that big silent school building. What could she do? She was just a little grasshopper against a giant centuries old system of racism. But she was not alone. My God was with her.

We can be like Carl Clark and his team at Urban Promise. They are so small against the troubles of Trenton where crime, drugs and despair hang heavy on every corner. What can they hope to do? They're just a school of grasshoppers up against the giants of gangs, poverty and crime. But when Carl called me up recently to thank me for Woodside's support he told me they are expanding their work and pushing back against the darkness. They're not alone. My God is with them.

We can be like Linda Hayes. Some of you remember Linda, a member of Woodside who passed away this week 3 years ago. More than a dozen years ago, God gave her a vision. There were 10.5 million AIDS orphans in Africa. Five thousand alone in Siavonga, Zambia. Back then Linda told me the Lord wanted us to raise \$30,000 to help build the Namumu Orphanage in that town so children didn't have to wander the streets, live in storm sewers or sell themselves just to survive. Back then a lot of people thought, "Great idea...but it will never work." At that time, the most we ever gave for a mission was \$5,000. People said, "We'll never raise \$30,000. We'll never make a dent in this crisis. We'll never stop the destructive force of AIDS." And they were right. It's a giant size problem and we're just a handful of grasshoppers. It's too big for us.

²Illustration submitted by Don McCullouch.

But it was not too big for my God.
Woodside didn't give \$30,000. You gave \$32,000. My God did that.
God is calling you to move forward and face overwhelming odds.
Some say trusting God that much takes a leap of faith.
Well, that shouldn't be too hard for a grasshopper.