

Vision Which Can Be Rejected

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

6th in an eight-part series

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Numbers 14:20–24 (CEB)

²⁰Then the LORD said, “I will forgive as you requested. ²¹But as I live and as the LORD’s glory fills the entire earth, ²²none of the men who saw my glory and the signs I did in Egypt and in the desert, but tested me these ten times and haven’t listened to my voice, ²³will see the land I promised to their ancestors. All who disrespected me won’t see it. ²⁴But I’ll bring my servant Caleb into the land that he explored, and his descendants will possess it because he has a different spirit, and he has remained true to me.

2 Chronicles 7:17–22 (CEB)

¹⁷As for you [Solomon], if you will walk before me just as your father David did, doing all that I have commanded you and keeping my regulations and case laws, ¹⁸then I will establish your royal throne, just as I promised your father David: ‘You will never fail to have a successor ruling in Israel.’ ¹⁹But if any of you ever turn away from and abandon the regulations and commands that I have given you, and go to serve other gods and worship them, ²⁰then I will uproot you from my land that I gave you, and I will reject this temple that I made holy for my name. I will make it a joke, insulted by everyone. ²¹Everyone who passes by this temple—so lofty now—will be shocked and will wonder, Why has the LORD done such a thing to this land and temple? ²²The answer will come, Because they abandoned the LORD, the God of their ancestors, who brought them out of Egypt. They embraced other gods, worshipping and serving them. This is why God brought all this disaster on them.”

Can we reject God’s vision? Sadly, God’s people often have done just that.

I imagine that nothing breaks God’s heart more than when someone walks away from God, choosing their own path rather than the way of love and faithfulness. Many Christians have believed that once a person is genuinely God’s, i.e., once God’s saving grace has been poured on them, they cannot turn away, for God’s grace is irresistible. Augustine said grace is like a medicine that can make a blind man see. When grace is poured in to our unseeing eyes and we can actually see the grace and glory of God, all resistance melts away.

But we Methodists don’t believe any such thing. Rather, we believe that, although we are utterly incapable of saving ourselves, we can resist and even reject God’s grace and love. We are not caught in some sort of irresistible tractor beam we might see in Star Trek. No . . . God desires our love and for that love to be real, it must be freely given, offered with a free and unmanipulated heart. Otherwise, it is not love.

Further, when we turn to the Bible we find story after tragic story of a people who reject God, who think they know best. Last week, we began the story of the Hebrews’ arrival at the Promised Land after their escape from Egypt. We learned that they turned away out of fear. They let their fears overwhelm their trust in God. But how much did they truly trust God even before they got to Canaan? Indeed, their story can be seen as a series of decisions and in each one they chose to reject God, to walk away from God’s love and mercy.

Choices

First, the Israelites made the decision to complain, practically without ceasing. Abraham Lincoln once observed that people are about as happy as they make up their minds to be. I think he was right. We can wake up each morning and decide whether we are going to have a positive outlook that day or a negative one. Yes, the Israelites were anxious and scared as they traveled through the Sinai wilderness, but they could

have decided to swallow their grumbling and confidently embrace God's promises. Instead, it is as if they were readying themselves for one final break from the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Second, at Mt. Sinai they abandoned God completely, making instead a golden calf and praising this metal statue for saving them from Pharaoh. Some of the most moving parts of the Bible are found in Exodus 32-34, where Moses prevails on God to give the people another chance. And, of course, God does . . . for that is the very character of God. (See the accompanying text box to learn more of God's essential character.)

Third, even after getting another chance, the Israelites decided to criticize, directing their anxieties at Moses. In Numbers 12, Aaron, Moses' brother, and Miriam, Moses' sister, opposed Moses. "What makes him so special?," they thought to themselves. But it was God who had made Moses special. Like complaining, criticizing hardly seems like a decision, hardly a rejection of God. Yet, we are defined by many such decisions we make every day. Will we criticize or will we support? Will we go on or will we turn away?

Fourth, as we saw last week, the Israelites decided to retreat from Canaan. This one is easier to understand as a decision. Would they trust God and enter Canaan despite the fears of their spies or would they rely on their own judgment and turn back? But the grumbling beget the criticizing and the criticizing beget the retreat. Our own lives are like this. Lots of wrong "little" decisions lead inexorably to a wrong "big" decision. Do we really think that we can deny God in the small stuff of our lives and yet trust God in the big stuff? Wise Christians know that the mature Christian life is a life led fully in God's presence, in the small decisions as well as the big ones.

And what is the consequence of the Israelites' rejection of God's vision for them? They would wander in the wilderness for forty years, until that generation had died. It would be their children and their children's children who would enter the land God had promised them. Yes, we are free to reject God and God's vision for us, but let's not kid ourselves, there are consequences . . . often dire consequences.

Israel's fall

My wife and I have been blessed to do some traveling overseas. We've seen evidence of countless nations and empires that were once great but now are only ruins. We once stood in the ruins of ancient Carthage, founded by a Phoenician queen 800 years before Jesus. Carthage was burned by the Romans and covered with salt so nothing could grow there. We've been to great Roman Coliseum finished in 82AD, now a shadow of its once grand self.

Nearly a thousand years before Jesus, the nation of Israel was at its zenith of power and wealth. Yet, just four centuries later, Jerusalem lay in ruins, a burned-out hulk, the Ark of the Covenant lost forever. Why?

The story of ancient Israel is, in many ways, the tragic story of a people chosen by God to be the light of the world yet unwilling to live as God taught them to live. No sooner do they escape Egypt than they fall into bickering and complaining in the wilderness. When Moses goes up God's mountain to get the Law, the people fashion an idol of a golden calf. After entering the Promised Land, God is to be their king, but the people soon begin to live as they see fit, to do what was right in their own eyes. Despite the warnings of Samuel, the people demand a human king. Saul soon proves to be disobedient and descends into madness. David takes the throne but sins horribly. His son, Solomon, imports countless foreign gods and religions along with his thousand wives and concubines. After Israel splits in two, the northern kingdom of Israel goes from bad king to bad king, men who hunt down God's prophets, until the kingdom is swept away by the Assyrians. The southern kingdom of Judah fares only a little better. There are a few kings who call the people back to God. But even Judah does not turn from its wicked ways. Far from healed, as God had promised Solomon was possible,

Judah too was destroyed and the people sent into exile. . . . Can you reject God even after you are God's people? . . . Just ask the Israelites.

And so our task is to do our best at discerning our part in moving God's purposes forward and then, with courage and steadfast love press on, never tuning away. Is there a promise here that all things will work out as we plan? No, but we can have confidence that even in our mistakes, God makes all things work for good for those who love the Lord. May we be counted among them!

God's "Steadfast Love"

Before the Israelites depart Mt. Sinai, God reveals more of himself in a long list of adjectives and nouns (Exodus 34:6-7). One of the most striking is God's promise of "steadfast love for the thousandth generation." It is God's steadfast love that the people can and ought to trust when they reach the Promised land but do not. What does "steadfast love" really mean?

These two words translate the single Hebrew word, *hesed*, which is one of the most important words in the Old Testament. It is virtually a one-word summary of Israel's understanding of God. No English word can do it justice, not even two. It is one of those Hebrew words better translated with a paragraph.

Used more than 240 times in the Old Testament, especially in the Psalms, *hesed* conveys love, strength, trust, kindness, mercy, faithfulness, steadfastness, loyalty, truthfulness – all embodied in a covenantal relationship. Our word "devotion" perhaps best captures the nuances of *hesed*. God is devoted to his people. The older English translations most often rendered *hesed* as "lovingkindness," an archaic word but a good one.

Hesed is a covenantal word and could be used to talk about marital love. A marriage is a legal contract but much more. A marriage is a covenant between two people who are expected to demonstrate devotion and trust and lovingkindness in their relationship. Their devotion to each other is not just a sentiment; it is to be expressed in concrete actions of loving, protecting, and truthfulness. Under their covenant, each spouse is obligated to the other and finds great joy in those obligations. They are to abound in steadfast love for each other.

In much the same way, God's *hesed* for his people is expressed in God's acts of mercy and salvation. In Psalm 25, the psalmist proclaims that God's steadfast love has been "from of old." As the psalm unfolds, it is clear that the psalmist has in mind the Exodus, God's deliverance of his people from Egypt. God's love for his people, for us, is seen in his actions. We proclaim a God-who-acts. The psalmist prays that he would know God's ways so he can, through his actions, be faithful to the covenant just as God has been faithful. After all, this is what covenant partners do. And this is what the Israelites fail to do when they reach the border of Canaan.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Read through the story of the Exodus and its aftermath sometime. You will be shocked by how quickly God's people turn on God and away from God. They whine and complain. They make idols of gold and promises they break before the words are out of their mouths. And now, at the border of Canaan, they reject God's vision and turn away. Do you think the ancient Israelites are really so different from ourselves? Have you ever turned away from God? In what ways do we choose the wilderness? Is it just a desire to do what we want, to do anything but what God wants?
2. When the Israelites reject God's vision and turn away from the Promised Land there are consequences. God decrees that the entire generation will not enter the land. Instead they will wander for forty years until the succeeding generation is

ready. Do you think this is a just decision by God? What do you think God should have done? Have you ever turned away from something you thought God probably wanted you to do? You might share some of these stories. What consequences did you suffer for turning back, if you suffered any at all?

3. With this story, we are still not very far into the story of God and his people. So often, the people are faithless. They turn away from love and give into their own arrogance and fears. Yet, God stays. The Israelites of Moses generation will not enter the Promised Land, but their children will. Why do you think God stays with his people through all this? Why doesn't God simply leave and start over somewhere else? What does God's faithfulness tell us about the true nature of love? How can it shape our own love, the love we give and the love we desire?

Daily Bible Readings

Monday, Numbers 27:12-23 Even Moses will never enter the Promised Land, because of his disobedience.

Tuesday, 1 Samuel 8:1-9 The Israelites reject God and demand a human king

Wednesday, Psalm 53:1-2 The fool who denies God

Thursday, John 3:19-21 Those who reject the light

Friday, 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8 Rejecting God and his teachings

Saturday, Revelation 21:22 – 22:5 In the end, there will be those who reject God and will not share in the new heavens and earth.

Scott Engle's Weekday Bible Classes

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own.

This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott has to cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Monday Evening Class

We are studying the book of Genesis

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We are studying the Gospel of Luke

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

Scott's 10:50 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Our current series: *Simply Good News: Reading the gospels with N. T. Wright*