

Lessons from Israel 3

The fear of Israel 1

In the first two lessons, we attempted to establish the need for this type of a study.

We saw the importance of Israel as a picture, a figure, showing us the ways in which God has dealt with His people.

Through the story of Israel, we get to know our God. His character shines through, as He establishes and works in the Jewish nation.

Today, the first of two lessons on the fear of Israel. There are times when the nation fears God and times when they fear men, rather than God. In part 1, we address the latter.

We address the fear of men in Israel, because the first substantive reference I could find for the kind of fear we understand to be the “fear of God” comes within an unusual and (perhaps) counter-intuitive context.

When we think of “the fear of God,” we draw upon passages like Psalm 2:11 “Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling.”

Or Psalm 19:9 “The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring for ever: the judgments of the LORD are true and righteous altogether.”

Perhaps Proverbs 1:7 “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge: but fools despise wisdom and instruction.”

Or Proverbs 14:27 “The fear of the LORD is a fountain of life, to depart from the snares of death.”

These passages all use the same word for fear, which means to revere God, offering Him appropriate reverence. (It is based on a genuine understanding of who He is, what He can do, and who we are in relation to Him.)

But this word is first used in Israel’s history back in Genesis 20:11.

This is not insignificant, because the concept of a God-fearing nation is exemplified in Israel. Without Israel, we would fail to have a full understanding of what means to be God fearing.

This first mention is particularly interesting because of its context. Let's take a closer look:

Genesis 20

1 ¶ And Abraham journeyed from thence toward the south country, and dwelled between Kadesh and Shur, and sojourned in Gerar.

Here we enter the story of the father of Israel, as we sojourns in Gerar.

2 And Abraham said of Sarah his wife, She is my sister: and Abimelech king of Gerar sent, and took Sarah.

Despite Abraham's later explanation - justification - this is obviously not true and has made a mess of the entire situation.

3 ¶ But God came to Abimelech in a dream by night, and said to him, Behold, thou art but a dead man, for the woman which thou hast taken; for she is a man's wife.

God himself explains the situation to Abimelech. Thankfully, he has not acted in any inappropriate manner toward her to this point, as God will affirm.

4 ¶ But Abimelech had not come near her: and he said, Lord, wilt thou slay also a righteous nation?

5 Said he not unto me, She is my sister? and she, even she herself said, He is my brother: in the integrity of my heart and innocency of my hands have I done this.

6 ¶ And God said unto him in a dream, Yea, I know that thou didst this in the integrity of thy heart; for I also withheld thee from sinning against me: therefore suffered I thee not to touch her.

7 Now therefore restore the man his wife; for he is a prophet, and he shall pray for thee, and thou shalt live: and if thou restore her not, know thou that thou shalt surely die, thou, and all that are thine.

This is a fascinating exchange. One that is embarrassing for Abraham, in that this king has shown "integrity" when Abraham has not. He has shown a reverence for and obedience to God - at this point - that Abraham has not!

8 ¶ Therefore Abimelech rose early in the morning, and called all his servants, and told all these things in their ears: and the men were sore afraid.

Abimelech's servants have enough sense to be "sore afraid." As they should be!

9 Then Abimelech called Abraham, and said unto him, What hast thou done unto us? and what have I offended thee, that thou hast brought on me and on my kingdom a great sin? thou hast done deeds unto me that ought not to be done.

10 And Abimelech said unto Abraham, What sawest thou, that thou hast done this thing?

There is confusion, disappointment, frustration, and even anger in this exchange, but mostly, Abimelech wants to know why?

11 ¶ And Abraham said, Because I thought, Surely the fear of God is not in this place; and they will slay me for my wife's sake.

Let's pause for a moment and think about the fact that this is (as far as I can tell) the first reference to this phrase "fear of God" in the history of Israel.

It comes as part of a false accusation against the king and the people of Gerar.

Abraham essentially says "I was in fear of you, because I assumed you didn't fear God." The implication is that Abraham did fear God. But at this moment, we find no evidence for it.

To fear God we must have an accurate (or at least adequate) understanding of who He is. We know He is the creator, the sovereign, the Lord over all, the omnipotent, the holy, and that is why we have the proper reverence for Him.

Abraham reveals in this lie - and in His fear of man - that He is (during this episode) failing to "fear God" himself!

He has the proverbial "beam" in his own eye, while he tries to remove the speck from Abimelech's eye. In making the accusation that Gerar does not fear God, he highlights not their, but his own error.

On to the technicalities and justifications:

12 And yet indeed she is my sister; she is the daughter of my father, but not the daughter of my mother; and she became my wife.

13 And it came to pass, when God caused me to wander from my father's house, that I said unto her, This is thy kindness which thou shalt shew unto me; at every place whither we shall come, say of me, He is my brother.

Then, in contrast:

14 ¶ And Abimelech took sheep, and oxen, and menservants, and womenservants, and gave them unto Abraham, and restored him Sarah his wife.

15 And Abimelech said, Behold, my land is before thee: dwell where it pleaseth thee.

16 And unto Sarah he said, Behold, I have given thy brother a thousand pieces of silver: behold, he is to thee a covering of the eyes, unto all that are with thee, and with all other: thus she was reproved.

Matthew Henry says this about the passage we just read: "He [Abimelech] gives to Sarah good instruction, tells her that her husband (her brother he calls him, to upbraid her with calling him so) must be to her for a covering of the eyes, that is, she must look at no other, nor desire to be looked at by any other. Note, Yoke-fellows must be to each other for a covering of the eyes. The marriage-covenant is a covenant with the eyes, like Job's [in Job 31:1 'I made a covenant with mine eyes; why then should I think upon a maid?']"

17 ¶ So Abraham prayed unto God: and God healed Abimelech, and his wife, and his maidservants; and they bare children.

18 For the LORD had fast closed up all the wombs of the house of Abimelech, because of Sarah Abraham's wife.

The grace of God, the kind that (in part) prompts us to have the reverence we call the "fear of God" is displayed even in this. But we want to move forward in the history of Israel, not forgetting that we could cite - and will cite - many wonderful examples of the fear of God, but instead recalling incidents in which the fear of man was again evident.

Let's move forward into: Numbers 13:1-3, 17-21, 25-33

You'll probably remember that a land was promised to the father of Israel, Abraham beginning in Genesis 12.

The borders of this land were defined in Genesis 15, verse 18 "In the same day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, Unto thy seed have I given this land, from the river of Egypt unto the great river, the river Euphrates:"

This promise was confirmed, when God spoke to Abraham's son Isaac in Genesis 26:3 "Sojourn in this land, and I will be with thee, and will bless thee; for unto thee, and unto thy seed, I will give all these countries, and I will perform the oath which I sware unto Abraham thy father;"

We pick up the story when the children of Israel have been led out of captivity in Egypt.

Led by Moses, they are looking forward to taking up residence in their promised "land of milk and honey." God instructs Moses to send men into the land and he outlines the purpose:

Numbers 13:1-3

1. And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying,
2. Send thou men, that they may search the land of Canaan, which I give unto the children of Israel: of every tribe of their fathers shall ye send a man, every one a ruler among them.
3. And Moses by the commandment of the LORD sent them from the wilderness of Paran: all those men were heads of the children of Israel.

- This is a command from God
- He restates the promise
- The land "which I give unto the children of Israel"
- There could be no doubt – this was their land

Numbers 13:17-21

17. And Moses sent them to spy out the land of Canaan, and said unto them, Get you up this way southward, and go up into the mountain:
18. And see the land, what it is; and the people that dwelleth therein, whether they be strong or weak, few or many;
19. And what the land is that they dwell in, whether it be good or bad; and what cities they be that they dwell in, whether in tents, or in strong holds;
20. And what the land is, whether it be fat or lean, whether there be wood therein, or not. And be ye of good courage, and bring of the fruit of the land. Now the time was the time of the firstripe grapes.
21. So they went up, and searched the land from the wilderness of Zin unto Rehob, as men come to Hamath.

- The mission was to bring back intelligence
- It was to determine the state of things within the land
- Whatever the circumstances, they did not impact the promise
- Or the faithfulness of the One who made the promise
- Strong or weak, few or many, good or bad, tents or strong holds, fat or lean, God's promise remained
- It was up to the people to believe – or not believe, to fear God or to fear men

Numbers 13:25-33

25. And they returned from searching of the land after forty days.

26. And they went and came to Moses, and to Aaron, and to all the congregation of the children of Israel, unto the wilderness of Paran, to Kadesh; and brought back word unto them, and unto all the congregation, and shewed them the fruit of the land.

27. And they told him, and said, We came unto the land whither thou sentest us, and surely it floweth with milk and honey; and this is the fruit of it.

- A report is given after forty days of searching
- They provide eyewitness accounts and even physical evidence
- Everything was just as God said in Exodus 3:8 "And I am come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land unto a good land and a large, unto a land flowing with milk and honey; unto the place of the Canaanites, and the Hittites, and the Amorites, and the Perizzites, and the Hivites, and the Jebusites."
- The report that first came to Moses, when God spoke to him from the burning bush in the wilderness, was corroborated by this evidence
- Everything checked out
- In other words – what God said is true
- All God says checks out (is found true)

Numbers 13:28-29

28. Nevertheless the people be strong that dwell in the land, and the cities are walled, and very great: and moreover we saw the children of Anak there.

29. The Amalekites dwell in the land of the south: and the Hittites, and the Jebusites, and the Amorites, dwell in the mountains: and the Canaanites dwell by the sea, and by the coast of Jordan.

- "Nevertheless" is a key word in this passage
- It is like our modern "on the other hand"
- It opens the possibility of going a different way
- Not trusting God
- It takes the eyes of the people off God's promise and shifts their focus to circumstances
- They see strong people, walled cities that are large, even people who are unusually large – giants, that dwell in the mountains and by the sea
- Like Abraham before them in Genesis 20, they are evaluating based on fear
- The fear of man

Numbers 13:30-31

30. And Caleb stilled the people before Moses, and said, Let us go up at once, and possess it; for we are well able to overcome it.

31. But the men that went up with him said, We be not able to go up against the people; for they are stronger than we.

- Caleb breaks into the story and offers a little sense
- He takes God at His word
- Saying "Let us go up at once"
- He would prefer to waste no time
- He is convinced they can possess it
- He is convinced of this, certainly, because God said they would
- And he makes another statement: "we are well able to overcome it"
- I wonder what gave him this idea?
- It certainly wasn't the evidence that was provided by those who feared man and not inclined to believe God
- For they said, essentially, that everything was against them
- The people in the land are stronger
- They have fortified themselves – and are even bigger than us
- The circumstances prevent us
- Is this true?
- Yes, if you fail to see God as He really is
- Yes, if you fail to fear Him, with your eyes on men

Numbers 13:32-33

32. And they brought up an evil report of the land which they had searched unto the children of Israel, saying, The land, through which we have gone to search it, is a land that eateth up the inhabitants thereof; and all the people that we saw in it are men of a great stature.

33. And there we saw the giants, the sons of Anak, which come of the giants: and we were in our own sight as grasshoppers, and so we were in their sight.

- This is called an "evil" report
- It is an "unfavorable" report
- They were providing facts
- But the were facts that didn't matter
- They didn't take into account the God over their circumstances
- The God that was on their side
- The God that made the promise

Numbers 14:1-9

1. And all the congregation lifted up their voice, and cried; and the people wept that night.
2. And all the children of Israel murmured against Moses and against Aaron: and the whole congregation said unto them, Would God that we had died in the land of Egypt! or would God we had died in this wilderness!
3. And wherefore hath the LORD brought us unto this land, to fall by the sword, that our wives and our children should be a prey? were it not better for us to return into Egypt?
4. And they said one to another, Let us make a captain, and let us return into Egypt.
5. Then Moses and Aaron fell on their faces before all the assembly of the congregation of the children of Israel.
6. And Joshua the son of Nun, and Caleb the son of Jephunneh, which were of them that searched the land, rent their clothes:
7. And they spake unto all the company of the children of Israel, saying, The land, which we passed through to search it, is an exceeding good land.
8. If the LORD delight in us, then he will bring us into this land, and give it us; a land which floweth with milk and honey.
9. Only rebel not ye against the LORD, neither fear ye the people of the land; for they are bread for us: their defence is departed from them, and the LORD is with us: fear them not.

- Their lesson, our lesson: fear not man