

SPIES LIKE US

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During the Cold War, *the CIA's most highly trained spies weren't even human!*¹

According to an article by the Smithsonian, “the U.S. government deployed nonhuman operatives—ravens, pigeons, even cats—to spy on [our] adversaries.” Animals would be deployed to carry and place electronic transmitters disguised as pieces of slate and carry out other intelligence missions.

The US government contracted the same trainers who taught theme park and television animals to do ‘whimsically human’ activities like ride bikes, beat on drums or play a game of baseball. Behind the scenes these same trainers from Hot Springs, Arkansas were teaching “ravens to deposit and retrieve objects, pigeons to warn of enemy ambushes, or even cats to eavesdrop on human conversations.”

“‘We never found an animal we could not train, never.’ said Bob Bailey, who in his career has done everything from teaching dolphins to detect submarines to inventing the Bird Brain, an apparatus that enabled a person to play tick-tack-toe against a chicken.”²

There’s an interesting bit of espionage in Numbers chapter 13. The Israelites had journeyed from Egypt through the wilderness and were poised on the edge the Promised Land that the Lord had been talking to them about. And here, God allowed them to send in a party of spies to get a look at where He would be taking them.

Now, we are not Israel. Theologically speaking, it’s very important that we remember that. It’s also important to remember that Canaan is not a picture or type of Heaven. There are no giants to slay in eternity, and I’m grateful for that!

But comparing this story to our own lives we’re reminded that we are sent as soldiers behind enemy lines for our King. As we go through life there’s a lot God wants to show us and much He has for us to accomplish. And so, devotionally speaking, we can find some insights from this text. So, let’s start in and see what we see.

Numbers 13.1-2 - And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, “Send men to spy out the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the children of Israel; from each tribe of their fathers you shall send a man, every one a leader among them.”

When the CIA does espionage it’s to figure out strategies and learn previously unknown information. That’s not why the Lord had them go in - He had already been there! He knew exactly what they would face in Canaan and what they could look forward to. We learn in Deuteronomy that the people were nervous about what lay ahead and asked if a search party could go in first. The Lord graciously condescended to their timidity and allowed this preliminary expedition. But notice how the Lord spoke to them about it. He spoke from a position of victory. He said, “I want you to go see what I am *giving* to you.” In the Lord’s mind, it was already concluded that He would give them the land and empower them to conquer it.

¹ <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/the-cias-most-highly-trained-spies-werent-even-human-20149/?no-ist>

² *ibid*

We can have confidence that there is power for us when we walk the road of faith. Even when the terrain is rough or threatening, we have the empowering and equipping of a God who has been before us and has prepared the way.

Notice too, this was a sizable team of spies. I've never been trained in covert operations, but I'm guessing one of the first rules is you probably don't want to travel in a big group! But it highlights the fact that they didn't have to be afraid, because the Lord was with them. And it shows us that there's a lot of slots to fill when we're doing the Lord's work. The work of the Body is meant to be done with others and with each fulfilling some role.

Numbers 13.3 - So Moses sent them from the Wilderness of Paran according to the command of the Lord, all of them men who were heads of the children of Israel.

They were going from the wilderness to the Promise. You'd think anticipation would be at an all time high, but that wasn't the case. Just about everybody was nervous about what dangers were ahead, which I can understand, but, even more amazingly, later on the next generation of 2 and a half of these tribes would come to Moses and say, "You know what, we're happy to just stay on *this* side of the Jordan. We don't need to see what's over there." And they settle for a plot in the wilderness.

In the Christian life there's always a danger of disregarding what the Lord has shown us and settling. When we don't stay stirred up for the Lord and for ministry, our zeal settles and we become apathetic. The Bible calls it being lukewarm, and it's a terrible state for a believer to be in. Or there's the danger of settling the way these couple of tribes would - for less. They heard what was being given to them by God, but because of what it would require they decided to settle for something easier and more comfortable, something that at the moment seemed just as good, but what would eventually draw them away from their community, away from the Lord and into sin and captivity.

Settling is never a good thing in the Christian life. We should take care to stay stirred up and stay pressing on toward the goal that Christ has set before us, believing that His way is better.

Now in verses 4 through 15 they name each of these guys and the tribes they were from. And, without disrespecting them, we're going to skip that. Drop down to verse 16.

Numbers 13.16 - These are the names of the men whom Moses sent to spy out the land. And Moses called Hoshea the son of Nun, Joshua.

In the midst of this story we see that Hoshea picked up a new name, the one we know him by: Joshua.

As we live the Christian life, Christ redefines us. This is something that is said explicitly in the Word and something that is demonstrated to us a number of times. We see it here. Jacob was renamed and redefined as Israel by the Lord. We read in Mark chapter 3 that Jesus took Simon and renamed him Peter. Peter, one of the great examples of how the Lord redefines a life.

Your life is being redefined as God conforms you into the image of Christ. And when you're finally finished you're going to get *your* new name.

Revelation 2.17 - He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will give some of the hidden manna to eat. And I will give him a white stone, and on the stone a new name written which no one knows except him who receives it.

So the encouragement to us is to allow God to redefine us. We don't want our desires or our liberties or our past to define us, we want to allow God to define who we are.

Numbers 13.17-20 - Then Moses sent them to spy out the land of Canaan, and said to them, "Go up this way into the South, and go up to the mountains, and see what the land is like: whether the people who dwell in it *are* strong or weak, few or many; whether the land they dwell in *is* good or bad; whether the cities they inhabit *are* like camps or strongholds; whether the land *is* rich or poor; and whether there are forests there or not. Be of good courage. And bring some of the fruit of the land." Now the time was the season of the first ripe grapes.

This was going to be quite a trip. Some parts would be tougher than others. They'd go through valleys and over mountains. They'd go through forests and fields, camps and cities. There was a lot to see and a lot to learn.

None of us really want to go through a valley in life, spiritually speaking, but we can be sure that valleys lie ahead. The perspective to keep in mind is that though the terrain may be difficult, we are on our way home to an incredible inheritance.

Now here are a couple things we know about their spy trip: First, we know that what they were doing was inherently dangerous. It was espionage after all. History seems to show that people don't like when you spy on them! We have enemies out there. And their goal is to hurt us and stop us and destroy us. We need to put on the armor God gives us and shield ourselves with faith.

But the other thing we know about this trip is that there would be fruit for them to harvest. Other than gathering knowledge that's the one thing they were tasked to do: Bring back some fruit! To me that's interesting.

We're not always as fruit-oriented as God is. At least, not the kind of fruit He's focused on. Lots of times Christians will call numeric success 'fruit', and that's not really a bad thing. But we're told in the Bible by God about the kind of fruit He wants to bear in our lives. Spiritual fruit. Fruit that blesses others and helps build up the Church. Fruit that transforms a life. And cultivating those fruits we read about in Scripture should be goals in our minds and harvests that we work towards *more* than numeric success either in ministry or in our regular lives.

Numbers 13.21-25 - So they went up and spied out the land from the Wilderness of Zin as far as Rehob, near the entrance of Hamath. And they went up through the South and came to Hebron; Ahiman, Sheshai, and Talmi, the descendants of Anak, were there. (Now Hebron was built seven years before Zoan in Egypt.) Then they came to the Valley of Eshcol, and there cut down a branch with one cluster of grapes; they carried it between two of them on a pole. They also brought some of the pomegranates and figs. The place was called the Valley of Eshcol, because of the cluster which the men of Israel cut down there. And they returned from spying out the land after forty days.

The Corps of Discovery led by Lewis and Clark lasted for 2 and a half years. After a while everyone back home thought they were dead, not that you can blame them.

This spy trip may not have lasted for 2 years, but this is still a long and tough trip. I don't know if any of you are *Survivor* fans, but each season lasts for 39 days on some remote beach. And for those who make it till day 39, those people are tore up!

Now, our Israeli spies here were certainly more able-bodied than the average American TV contestant, but this was a tough trip. It took stamina and effort and focus.

The Christian life is a long haul with lots of ground to cover. I don't mean to bum anyone out, but that's just the truth. It's good ground. It's leading us to a land of incredible promise and glory, but it's a long haul. I say that because just this past week I heard a pastor say in his sermon that embracing the cross and living the Christian life isn't difficult. I'd have to disagree. It requires dedication and sacrifice and self-denial and those aren't *complicated* things or *impossible* things, but they can certainly be painful or demanding or difficult at times. But, we do them because we know that what God has in store for us is incredible and greater and more abundantly than what we could gain for ourselves. He gives us the real future and real life when we *do* embrace Him and take up our cross.

Notice too before we move on that this expedition was a group effort. They traveled together, carried together. Christians don't live in a vacuum, we don't serve in a vacuum. We don't grow in a vacuum. There's a popular idea out there right now that I can just be an individual Christian who floats free and doesn't need the Church, but that's simply not true. If we're dismembered, we're going to fail to support others and be supported in key ways.

Numbers 13.26-27 - Now they departed and came back to Moses and Aaron and all the congregation of the children of Israel in the Wilderness of Paran, at Kadesh; they brought back word to them and to all the congregation, and showed them the fruit of the land. Then they told him, and said: "We went to the land where you sent us. It truly flows with milk and honey, and this *is* its fruit.

I love that last statement: *This is the fruit!* What an amazing thing to be able to point to and say, "Here's what God has waiting for us!"

We don't always have perfect clarity in life. Certainly when we're in the middle of a trial or storm we wonder what's going on and how the Lord is going to work it for good in our lives. But we *do* know the kind of fruit that the Lord has for us on the road we're walking. God is very up front about the harvest we can look forward to. He says, "If you walk with Me, here's the peace, here's the joy, here's the satisfaction, here's the usefulness, here's the wisdom, here's the fellowship." And like Jesus or like Paul we can focus on that fruit and that inheritance and that joy that has been set before us and press forward despite the difficulty or the danger and know that we are headed to a place where a river of life flows and we will be rewarded for our faithfulness and perseverance in this world.

Numbers 13.28-29 - Nevertheless the people who dwell in the land *are* strong; the cities *are* fortified *and* very large; moreover we saw the descendants of Anak there. The Amalekites dwell in the land of the South; the Hittites, the Jebusites, and the Amorites dwell in the mountains; and the Canaanites dwell by the sea and along the banks of the Jordan.

This wasn't really new information. The Lord had been very clear about where they were going and the people that were there. And more importantly, He had promised and demonstrated His incredible power that would go out on their behalf. He had already given them victory in battle over the Amalekites, not to mention the fact that He single-handedly toppled not just the armies of Egypt, but *the entire nation!*

The problem was that 10 of the 12 (and the multitude who listened to them) allowed their desire for safety and security to be the greatest motivator of their decisions. They assumed that avoiding the Canaanites would mean they'd be safe and sound. And through their choices, they were assuming that the conquest wouldn't be worth the cost or the difficulty.

What we allow to motivate us makes a big difference in our lives, spiritually and physically. If our main motivation is wealth or comfort or what we think of as stability and safety, then we're often not going to be making the Godly decision.

Here's the thing - they didn't want to go into the land, so where are they going to go? They suggest going back to Egypt, but there isn't an Egypt to go back to! It was laid waste by the plagues and the Egyptians would be none-too-happy to have them back. Their other option was to stay in the wilderness. Wandering around. Never growing fruit of their own. Never being built up the way the Lord wanted.

But, you know, if we don't check our motivations, it's easy for us to fall into this ourselves. We trade God's plan for a wilderness because on some human level it seems safer or easier or less costly. But it's never where we want to be. And we can't find fulfillment in the wilderness. Every time we see this sort of attitude demonstrated in God's word we think, "NO! Don't do it! Just go in!" Because we see the truth from heaven's perspective in those texts.

And that's exactly what Caleb says to them in verse 30. Don't settle!

Numbers 13.30 - Then Caleb quieted the people before Moses, and said, "Let us go up at once and take possession, for we are well able to overcome it."

We are able because God is able. Whatever giant you face, you are able because God is able. Like David we need to remember that we serve a living God and not let our hearts fail. Caleb had the kind of perspective the Lord wants us to have about our lives. Here's how the people responded:

Numbers 13.31-33 - But the men who had gone up with him said, "We are not able to go up against the people, for they *are* stronger than we." And they gave the children of Israel a bad report of the land which they had spied out, saying, "The land through which we have gone as spies *is* a land that devours its inhabitants, and all the people whom we saw in it *are* men of great stature. There we saw the giants (the descendants of Anak came from the giants); and we were like grasshoppers in our own sight, and so we were in their sight."

Couple of things - First of all, *of course* the Canaanites and the giants were stronger than them. But they did not have to battle alone. Sadly, the people failed to remember what God had done, what God had commanded and what God had promised.

It's a good reminder to us of how key it is for us to remember what the Lord has said, what He has done, what He has commanded and promised, especially when we're discouraged

Psalm 77.10-12 - *I will remember the years of the right hand of the Most High. I will remember the works of the Lord; Surely I will remember Your wonders of old. I will also meditate on all Your work, and talk of Your deeds.*

We must remember the Lord and charge forward in faith, knowing who our God is and that we are able because *HE* is able.

Joshua and Caleb tried to get them to remember that. They gave another impassioned plea in chapter 14.

Numbers 14.6-9 - But Joshua the son of Nun and Caleb the son of Jephunneh, *who were among those who had spied out the land, tore their clothes; and they spoke to all the congregation of the children of Israel, saying: “The land we passed through to spy out *is* an exceedingly good land. If the Lord delights in us, then He will bring us into this land and give it to us, ‘a land which flows with milk and honey.’ Only do not rebel against the Lord, nor fear the people of the land, for they *are* our bread; their protection has departed from them, and the Lord *is* with us. Do not fear them.”*

These guys walked in confidence, without fear because they viewed the scene through the lens of God’s word. They believed what God said and so it didn’t matter the terrain or the fortifications or the giants.

The crowd didn’t see things that way. They viewed their situation through their desire for ease and security and as a result they made the absolutely wrong decision.

So what about us? What do we want to walk away with tonight?

The foremost encouragement is that if you’re a Christian, God is with you and He has a plan for your life and He is able to accomplish that plan. He speaks to you from a position of victory. The fruit and the inheritance He’s set before us are worth the sacrifice and the difficulty they might require. It is an abundant and eternal life that can only be found in His service.

Rather than be like this multitude who stayed in the wilderness, we want to be people who press forward and walk the road that the Lord has prepared for us.

2 Corinthians 4.17-18 - For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding *and* eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen *are* temporary, but the things which are not seen *are* eternal.

We do that by remembering what God has said and done and following after Him as He leads us. Knowing that we are headed for a wonderful future, full of fruit, full of glory, greater than we could ask or imagine.